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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**GENDERED INFIDELITY
IN COMPARATIVE LITERARY CONTEXT**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of English and Comparative Literature

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Magda Elsehrawi

Under the supervision of **Dr. Ferial Ghazoul**

May / 2012

The American University in Cairo

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Has been approved by

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DEDICATION

In loving memory of my mother,
Tawhida Ahmed El-Sayyed

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis was written during one of the most difficult periods of my life. I look back at the year that has passed – inundated by revolution, national unrest, death and the loss of loved ones – and I feel it is a wonder that the coming pages of this thesis were ever written under those trying circumstances. I can confidently say that this research, which had stagnated in the wake of these circumstances, would never have seen the light were it not for family and friends who stood by me every step of the way: they tolerated my melodrama, listened to me, humored me, encouraged me, pulled my head out of the water when I was drowning in sorrow, and stayed by me when I needed them the most. They believed in me, when for a while, I didn't.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores and explains the recurring presence of the adulterous female character in narratives from the medieval period to the modern, with reference to four narratives: *The Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer from the medieval period, where there is a plentiful reservoir of tales about adulterous wives, as well as in the more recent novels of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1929) by the British novelist D. H. Lawrence, and *A Certain Woman* (2001) by the Egyptian novelist Hala El Badry, where the innate stream of thoughts of the contemporary adulterous wife and her struggles from a personal, social, and psychological aspects are represented. Through the exploration of these texts, this study seeks to go beyond stereotypes and question the standard view of the adulterous woman, by examining the *reasons* behind the act of adultery itself. Motivations for the adulteries are examined using diverse theoretical frameworks that cross various disciplinary borders and draw insights from literary criticism, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and gender studies.

Given the broad historical and geographical contexts that this study covers, as well as the differences in fictional conventions, the lapse of time, and the developments in narrative genres, this thesis attempts to trace the evolutionary progress of the adulterous female character and the transformation of her image from the medieval tale to the modern novel. Instead of the flat condemnation evident in the older narratives, the contemporary adulteress is alternatively approached from within, where her feelings and the driving forces behind her adulteries are examined.

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CHAPTER 1:

Introduction

“Dear me, when one thinks of it, one must admit that art owes a great deal to adultery...”

- George Moore, *Memoirs of a Dead Life*.

Until late in the twentieth century, the concept of female sexuality was never an easy topic for readers and critics to embrace – especially when it came to explicitly written narratives, and more so, if the product of those narratives was the character of an adulterous woman. In fact, if there is one thing that narratives of female adultery have in common, it's that at some point they have been censored or denounced on the grounds of decorum and morality. In contrast, major scandals around the character of an adulterous man over the literary timeline are scarce and even impartial, suggesting that their infidelities are not a major moral issue in comparison to those of a woman. As a result, the adulterous wife has lived under the spotlight of unfavorable stereotypes – and yet her presence has remained constant in literature from antiquity until modern day, where not only is she ever-present, but most of the novels in which she has appeared have been acknowledged as literary canons.

The character of the adulterous wife will be explored in selections from the medieval texts of *The Arabian Nights*¹ and *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, where there is a plentiful reservoir of tales about adulterous wives, as well as in the modern novels, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence and *A Certain Woman* by Hala El Badry², where the innate stream of thoughts of the contemporary adulterous wife and her struggles from a personal, social, and psychological aspect are represented. These texts have been chosen on the basis of their contextual variety, the age they reflect, as well as the evolution of the image of the adulterous wife from medieval to modern literatures. Through the exploration of these texts, this study

intends to both seek beyond, and to challenge, the stereotypes associated with the adulterous wife, and examine the *reasons* behind the act of adultery itself. Those reasons – as depicted through these texts – are plentiful, ranging from the need for fulfillment, control and power, liberation, individuality, love, possession, and even revenge – but in the end, each one of these reasons narrows down to two main elements that are initially intertwined. The first is the search for a womanhood that seems to have been lost in the marital realm, where in an extramarital sexual liaison, the wife finds a particular mental and physical satisfaction that is not gratified within wedlock, and hence regains control over particular aspects of her identity that she finds she has lost through marriage. The second, and also the main trigger for the first, is the need to escape patriarchal dominion and subordination within the marital foundation, where the social, cultural and religious expectations of her role as an obedient wife have trumped her individuality as a woman in her own right and hence, her search for love or sex beyond marriage is initially a search for a gendered identity she has been denied.

In each of the chosen narratives, the adulterous wife is plagued by insignificance and subordination in the patriarchal realm, where her violation of the assigned role and code of womanhood is one made in attempt to search for a part of their personal identity that has been lost or suffocated. And hence, these adulteries, from medieval to modern, raise several questions: Does patriarchy trump her character so much that she seeks to rebel against it? What role does the husband – and society – play in prompting these infidelities? How does the medieval adulteress differ from the modern, or initially, are they the same? Why have authors opted for an adulteress as a protagonist, and what purpose do they serve? This research aims to examine these questions, and reflect on the trends and contexts of the recurring presence of the adulterous wife in literary history, the evolution of her image, as well as the psychological and social development of her character. Throughout the course of my research, the chosen

narratives will be studied in the light of critical studies on the theme of adultery in fiction, while also drawing on the psychological and philosophical works in the field of gender.

Chapter Two, following the introduction in Chapter One, is structured as a division between several stories from *The Arabian Nights* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Traditionally narrated and interpreted from a male-oriented perspective, the characters of women – many of whom are voiceless – will be explored in the realm of general feminist criticism, in terms of context and probabilities regarding their social and domestic statuses, as well as a look into their psyche from an alternatively female-oriented perspective that allows for a different reading of the texts. At the same time, other narratives of similar structure and content in and around the medieval period will also be explored comparatively to discuss similarities and dissimilarities between them and the original texts, particularly in the contexts of sexuality, adultery, marriage, and tradition.

These contexts will also be explored in the modern narratives, particularly in Chapter Three, where new portrayals of the adulteress in modern times will be analyzed in comparison to the medieval, by studying the characters of two very different protagonists – Connie, an early twentieth-century British Christian woman, and Nahed, an Egyptian Muslim woman from the twenty-first century – and how their simultaneous plights in the realms of sex, love, marriage, adultery and patriarchy are extremely similar despite their contextual differences. Engaging in Freudian theory, his most well-known ideas regarding the intricate works of the human psyche are applied, particularly his theories regarding the *Id* and the *superego*. However, I will challenge some of the traditional psychoanalytical views that suggest the biological inferiority of women as a result of their genitalia, and how as a result they inevitably shape her subordinate status amongst society. In this study, I also engage Foucault, indicating how his version of the psychoanalytic discourse particularly regarding sex and repression in the shadow of censorship,

has contributed to a certain call for sexual equality as indicated through the twentieth century writers – Lawrence and El Badry. The erotic inclinations of both Freud and Foucault have made their theories best suited to the nature of this research, where, particularly in Chapter Three, their modern works are structured around the sexuality of the modern woman, and where the medieval woman is also brought in from Chapter Two occasionally to fit into their theoretical frameworks.

This study aims at examining the recurring character of the adulterous woman that has often been judged, but not often explored. Having appeared in texts as early as Homer, and traveled down the literary time-line to appear in innumerable narratives, from religious texts, to poems, plays, prose and novels, all the way from antiquity until modern day, surviving countless eras and literary and aesthetic movements. Depictions of sexuality have often been associated with sin, while the opposite is also true in how abstinence amounts to saintliness, creating a binarism in their depictions which will be explored further in this study. While the appearance of an adulterous female character has not gone out of literary fashion, she has nonetheless morphed to suit the changing times and fashions and literary traditions. This study therefore, through examining narratives from two different time periods, will inevitably examine two different genres also – the medieval fabliaux and the modern novel. Regrettably, a study that attempts to offer an analysis of adultery from the beginning of human civilization to the present is beyond the scope of this research. Instead, I hope to suggest how examining two important moments, at which notions of female infidelity are articulated in Arab-Islamic and European-Christian literary tradition from both periods, will suggest the enduring nature of the concern in patriarchal societies.

CHAPTER 2

The Arabian Nights and The Canterbury Tales: Medieval Texts in Context

Marriage, in the eyes of medieval society and religious culture, was important if people were to engage in sexual relations of any sort, where in the realms of patriarchy, marriage maintained “sexual taboos and inhibitions, especially those against adultery, premarital sex, and most particularly, illegitimacy” (Fortier 279). Maintaining the bloodlines was quintessential.

The concept of lust was one of the seven deadly sins of Christianity that could land a person straight into Hell, if they indulged in sex outside the boundaries of the acceptable. In Dante’s *Inferno* for example, his *Canto V* depicts a vivid description of the Circle Two of Hell, where those that have abandoned themselves to their passions and lustful appetites are forever swept in its relentless whirlwinds, deprived of reason and the light of God. The narrator in this medieval poem, first published in 1314, meets several of the famous adulterers in literary history, including Helen of Troy, her Trojan prince Paris, and Cleopatra, in the Circle Two of Hell. Dante’s use of these ancient characters suggests that the notion of adultery was an ever-existing social and moral quandary.

While sex was acceptable and encouraged under particular social conditions, such as marriage, and on the grounds of populating the earth, the lustful part of copulation was the element with spiritual consequences. Sex alone was fine; the pleasure part was sinful in puritanical contexts. But since sex and pleasure are so closely intertwined, separating the two is virtually impossible, and the combination of both is basically inevitable. As a result, sex was depicted in a bi-polar fashion in many of the medieval texts, where the dual complexity of either ‘good-or-bad’ often manifested itself in the portrayal of female characters. The archetypes of Eve and the Virgin Mary partake in the contrast between these two opposite images depicted in the medieval

literary texts which will be explored in this chapter – Eve, who promotes disobedience and movement against the will of God (and also the fall of Man), and the Virgin Mary, who submits completely to her divine appointed role. In religious texts, the binary nature of women as either saintly or fallen is depicted in portraying the two sides of the female character, without dwelling on middle ground. Medieval art and literature often represented women on some sort of a sexual axis; as either chaste and virtuous, or sexually insatiable, creating extreme representations of female characters (Heckel 3).

Such was often the case in the depictions of women in the *The Arabian Nights* and the *Canterbury Tales*. Though varied in context, culture, narrator, and date of production, these two collections of tales share more similarities than differences in terms of their structure as well as their depiction of women in the medieval realm. Each of them begins with a frame story / prologue that encompasses a multitude of smaller stories within, presenting a vast array of chaste, innocent, cunning, evil, and wanton female characters, including adulteresses. These stories are written in a terse fashion that gives general insight into the actions, social contexts, stereotypes, and perceptions that surround the character of the adulteress in particular, thereby serving to narrate her story without dwelling too much on her psyche, thus hardly elaborating the reasons that prompted the adulteries.

On reflection, many of the adulteries in *The Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales* relate either to patriarchal domination, pressure, suffocation, or mistreatment imposed by a male protagonist. Though not necessarily justified, a reflective reader will see the circumstances of such infidelities: kings that paid little attention to their queens; husbands that traveled and never came back; husbands that tightly restrained their wives in mistrust, maltreatment, and over-protectiveness; husbands that paid little or no attention to the emotional and physical needs of their wives but that kept them handy for exclusive sexual control. The stories in these two works

often bring the adulterous wife to the forefront of blame and the woe-stricken, cuckolded husband to the sympathy of readers. The evolution of the adulteress from one text to the other calls for a gendered reading into the catalysts for the act of adultery itself, of why these women have opted to violate social norms.

The Arabian Nights in Context

The frame story of *The Arabian Nights* begins with an act of infidelity, where Shahzaman comes home to find a black slave in his bedchambers with his queen. He slays them, goes to his brother Shahrayar, and lapses into depression until he discovers an even greater violation than the one he had witnessed in his own home – he finds his brother’s queen in a celebratory orgy with forty of her male and female slaves, as well as her slave and lover Mas‘ood, in the heart of the palace garden. While Shahrayar’s wife has chosen a lover who, according to Islamic court society, is the opposite and inferior of the king in every possible way, the enormity of her act resides in how she has actually made her infidelity a kind of rite of the Harem,

a rite that she apparently celebrates every time the king leaves the palace. And though it is carried out in the apparent seclusion of the harem, it can hardly have been a secret at all, except from Shahrayar. When [he] confronts the fact and the manner of his wife’s betrayal of him, he has to confront as well the realization that has only now become known to him has long been common knowledge at the court. (Clinton 109)

This discovery of the queen’s infidelity however, reflects an even greater problem, that it is “the hierarchies and frontiers that men erect to dominate women that predetermine women’s behavior. In the adulterous, criminal scene of the *1001 Nights*, the Harem frontiers are also porous and fragile. They can easily be blurred and erased; men dress up as women and enter unnoticed” (Mernissi 45-46).

The choice of a black slave as paramour is in itself an act of symbolic defiance by the queens. What adds to the magnitude of this defiance however, is also the location in which the infidelities take place. Shahzaman's queen performs her infidelities in the privacy of her bedchamber; Shahrayar's wife, however, takes her adultery to a much higher level of defiance, where her group gathering for sex outside a chamber and into the garden, moving from the enclosed room to the open courtyard. Shahrayar observes his wife's infidelity in the most secret and secure point in his kingdom, where the garden is

the heart of the castle and protected by walls, and the walls of the castle are protected by his own twenty years of just rule and by those of his father as well...[it] is a symbol and metaphor both for Shahrayar's psyche and self, and for the quality of his performance as a ruler of his kingdom. [His] wife has invaded, violated, and betrayed him in the very center of his personal and public being. (Clinton 109-110)

Hence, the rage borne of Shahrayar's discovery is not one of jealousy, or entirely of how he has been rendered a cuckold, but it is a rage that "springs from the sudden projection of himself on the body of the slave. His 'royal' body has been split into two bodies, which reveal that his status as a king was no more than an illusion" (Leeuwen 48) – a notion that is further elaborated upon meeting with the jinn's captive, where his sense of royalty is violated for the second time.

The story of the jinn and the kidnapped bride alters Shahrayar's pain-laced stance into one of blood-thirst, where his encounter with her snaps his judgment and further crushes his pride. In the jinn's story, a bride whom the jinn kidnapped on the night of her wedding is held captive under the sea in a chest bolted seven times – and yet miraculously, the kidnapped bride is still able to "cuckold" him, and upon an oath to herself does so with as many men as she possibly can. While a quick reading may reveal the cunning of the women and her sexual appetite, a more gendered reading reveals that the same woman is a victim as she has been abducted.

The jinn's captive is unique in how she suggests a duality of character. She is, as a kidnapped bride locked away in the bowels of the sea, very much the medieval archetype of the *damsel in distress*, a maiden whom the jinn calls his "chaste and honorable lady" (Dawood 18). And yet, at her first opportunity, she becomes the opposite of 'damsel' and 'chaste'. Instead, she converts into something of a *femme fatale*. She is the first of the three adulteresses in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* to speak, and also to exemplify the switch of authority from a gendered perspective; this scene in particular is highly suggestive of a switch in power roles. The kings here are the ones hiding in fear, and the woman, a nameless prisoner, wields the power to make them do her bidding, threatening them otherwise with death. Her bidding is also a kind of counter-rape, where the kings are literally forced into copulation in order to save themselves from certain death. Hence, the captive woman in this scene becomes the authority, rendering the kings under her command, where she takes on the patriarchal role and has the power to rape and possess. The kings take the more submissive role, where they are powerless and submit to her commands and wishes. When they refuse to come down after she beckons them, she threatens that she will "wake the jinnee, and he shall put (them) to a cruel death," threatening them once again when they refuse to copulate with her – "'Come, pierce me with your rapiers... if you don't do my bidding, I will wake the jinnee'. Afraid of the consequences, they proceeded to mount her in turn" (Dawood 18-19).

This duality however does not belong to the captive alone. Each of the adulteresses in the frame story live a double life and also exhibit a duality in terms of authority. Though readers are not introduced to the two queens and their own stories like the jinn's captive, as they are encountered only on the nights of their debauchery, it is not unfair to assume that the queens were subordinate damsels (though perhaps not in distress) in the presence of their husbands. They were wives, mothers, queens, and women that obeyed their kings, submerged in the general "implication of female inferiority underlying the tale as a whole" (Irwin 160). But in the

absence of the kings, we can also assume the opposite, where they are disobedient and willful. They take on other lovers, particularly choosing a slave over someone in the kingdom of higher ranking, such as a vizier for example. The question is, *why*? What ignites the need for adultery in the lives of these queens? In the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* we as readers empathize with Shahrayar's violent reactions and see him as a wounded man. What we *don't* get to read in *The Arabian Nights* is the alternative side to the story that belongs to these women. We never know their names, and we also never hear them speak. We see the adulteries only through the eyes of the kings, and a blood-laced version of justice only through the code of their manhood, but we never know why it was that the Queens sought copulation outside of wedlock.

Feminist criticism has often sought to approach and define human experiences in works of literature that have been told or exemplified through a male-oriented experience, which is especially the case in *The Arabian Nights*. From an alternative perspective thus, we may dare to assume that the king has his queens tucked away in the Harem, secluded, unvisited, and unseen. There arises the question of suffocation, isolation, dominance, as well as competition with other women in the Harem for the affections of the king. The woman in this context becomes an object of sorts, stored to be enjoyed only as the king wills it, where her humanity is disregarded. What would she do in a situation as such, given that she has time on her hands and little or no attention from her husband? She cannot openly revolt, nor break down the Harem walls and leave. At the heart of court culture, she is somewhat of a prisoner, unable to escape, and expected to obey. But she *can* avenge her helplessness, as well as entertain her loneliness, by jabbing at the one weakness that her husband truly possesses; namely, his pride in his integrity as a man and a king. It is here that the queens are inevitably converted from objectified and humble damsels to a version of the femme fatale. When the queens choose to take control, they do so in the one place they can really dominate – the marital bed, or the sexual realm, where through their private acts of adultery they undermine husbands and their authority.

While chastity or faithfulness has landed a woman in the seclusion of the Harem and hence may have stripped her of her basic and primal sense of individuality and even femininity, her being instead unchaste and unfaithful strips the husband of his own sense of masculinity. Masculinity as control, power, and possession, is shaken by a wife's adulteries. The adulterous act of the wives in the frame story is, literally, the mighty blow that knocks the wind out of both Shahzaman and Shahrayar. The infidelities may not be a matter of sexual deprivation or boredom, but alternatively, a means of revenge for that suffocation. The adulterous scene in the prologue "sees to sum up the entire Harem tragedy; women's fatal need to topple the hierarchy built by the husband who has locked her up, by copulating with his male slave" (Mernissi 45-46). The revenge therefore is not only about committing the crime of adultery – the partner in crime is also important. The queen chooses a "black slave" over other powerful men in the kingdom. Likewise, the captive woman chooses any human being over her jinnee captor. There is, in both stories, the notion of choosing a partner of "lesser" status in order for the revenge to be the ultimate blow. The queens are empowered by their defiance and choice of paramour: they are satisfied at knowing their oblivious husbands are cuckolded.

For the Jinn's captive, her hunger for revenge against the entire male species is a driving force. The Jinn calls her his chaste and honorable lady, and her vengeance hence resides in how she has left him thinking that she is one, while all along she strives to be anything but. Her pursuit of sex however is more than lusty cravings. Her true pleasure is in having done the act, and collecting the proof that she has actually done so. The rings which symbolize their identity as kings are passed on to her. Her stripping them of their jewelry is symbolic of stripping them of their sense of self and wholeness as men, in the same manner that she herself has been stripped of her will and rendered no more than an exclusive sex object at the beck and call of the Jinn. Sex with others is her method of revenge – a relish in her power to twist the positions of

authority, and bask in the private knowledge that she has cuckolded the Jinn in every possible way. While the captive tells her story of why she must betray the Jinn, she also implants the notion into Shahrayar's mind, where the crux of her story is in how "he [the jinn] knew little how cunning we women are" (Dawood 19). She continues:

[the jinn] carried me away on my bridal night and imprisoned me in a box which he placed inside a chest. He fastened the chest with seven locks and deposited it at the bottom of the roaring sea. But he little knew how cunning we women are. (Dawood 19)

Hence, the first generalization here is made: women become officially branded as cunning adulteresses, and Shahrayar goes home to his kingdom bent on avenging his honor at the expense of the maidens in his kingdom.

While the adulteries render Shahzaman and Shahrayar devastated, the Jinn's captive adds salt to their wounds, stripping them bare of their power as kings in the face of her ravenous hunger for revenge through copulation. While Shahzaman's wife makes

an ugly ripple in [the] surface, that of Shahrayar's wife shatters it with destructive force. [...] then, after his encounter with the jinn and the kidnapped bride, he returns to his throne, but transformed into a monster of injustice. (Clinton 108)

Shahrayar finds himself in a context that is governed by female sexuality, where in spite of his royal status as king during the day, "at night he [was] no more than a slave under the command of his wife [...] the act of adultery signifies that the night has been usurped by the queen, that she is the mistress that dominates his nocturnal existence [and] blurs the boundaries between day and night and affects the position of power of the sultan" (Leeuwen 57-58). At a highly subconscious level, Shahrayar attempts to restore his authority over the realm of the night. He marries a virgin, and by deflowering her he regains exclusive sexual control, and at the same time seizes the domain of the night. As the day approaches, the bride is executed, preventing her from entering the realm of the daytime altogether. Scheherazade narrates all her stories by night. This suggests that there is a day-versus-night element that could also expand into historical

concepts of gender. The daytime, or the *sun*, has been historically associated with maleness. In contrast, the female is often associated with the night, or the *moon*, and it is interesting that Scheherazade only narrates at night, stopping as soon as the daylight emerges, when her husband goes out during the day to run his kingdom. While the day is associated with the working male (the king), the night becomes associated with seduction, sexuality, women, imagination, the mysterious, and the supernatural. Perhaps this also explains why sexuality is such a fundamental part of *The Arabian Nights* (narrated at night, the time for nighttime pleasures) and why it would be missing in Shahrayar's newly oriented world of ultimately patriarchal domination. In the world he creates, there are no pleasures of any sort, except the repeated cycle of death made in attempt to sate his hunger for revenge. In this new world, Shahrayar has seized both the night and the day, turning *both* into male-dominated domains with no space whatsoever to allow the women to cuckold him again. He has, also subconsciously, tried to eradicate any concept of female authority, and tries through the cycle of sex and death to omit any significant female presence on its own.

In Freudian terms, Shahrayar represents the psyche of a man who has become governed by his *Id*³, giving in to primal urges that prompt him to indulge in an uncanny dyad of sex and death every single night. Shahrayar is blinded by his rage and becomes incapable of rational judgment, wondering if he and his brother are the exceptional victims to the treachery of women. His views on women's wile is confirmed when encountering the Jinn, whom he seems to believe has suffered a greater injustice than him, in terms of how a great supernatural and powerful being has been cuckolded by the meekest, weakest of women. Shahrayar

sees the Jinn as the aggravated party in this drama. In doing this, he overlooks or gives no value to the great injustice that the (captive) woman has endured. The Jinn stole her away from her husband on her wedding night and has since kept her locked up at the bottom of the sea, releasing her temporarily only when it suits him to do so. Surely she is the one who has suffered injustice. And she has, like Shahrayar's wife, taken vengeance in a way that is most damaging to his sense of self; she has done so because that is the only means left open to her for expressing

her very justified anger against him. She cannot physically oppose him. He is too strong. She cannot flee him. He would find her wherever she went. She cannot plead with him. Had he any regard for her wishes he would not have kidnapped her in the first place. (Clinton 112)

The captive's short speech about her abduction allows readers for the first time in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights* to see and perhaps judge the circumstances from the female-oriented perspective, creating the possibility of interpreting the actions of the wives of Shahzaman and Shahrayar in a similar way. For Shahrayar, however, the captive's speech has the opposite effect; he has no sympathy for the captive whatsoever. On the contrary, "he sees the Jinn as human, although he is not, but cannot see the bride as human, although she is" (Clinton 113). Based on the three samples of women that he has encountered in the frame story thus far, Shahrayar decides that all women are evil and are determined to cuckold their men, who in turn stand little chance in the face of their cunning ways and sexual drives. He goes back to his kingdom bent on saving his own gender, with no less than a war against the entire female sex on his mind.

In *The Arabian Nights*, the queen's violation of her marital vows at a private level leads to an even greater violation at a national level; Shahrayar marries a virgin every day for three years, sleeps with her at night, and then takes her life the next morning by execution, where "what started as a war between the sexes has turned into a tragic political upheaval with bereaved fathers rebelling against the king" (Mernissi 46). These sexual and moral violations he commits at a national level exemplify the way patriarchal power dominates and destroys through violence in the name of pride and honor⁴. There is the notion of attempting a kind of correction, inevitably leading from one blood bath to another. Where Shahrayar is concerned, he attempts correction by slaying his wife and her lover, and again attempts a kind of gender-related cleansing through his new nightly/daily routine of love and murder. This exemplifies how

destructive the patriarchal ego can be, particularly if it belongs to a betrayed king whose manhood and hence legitimacy and power suddenly become socially questionable.

In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade reflects the 'alternative' form of woman, who is very learned, educated, intelligent, and "possessed many accomplishments and was versed in the wisdom of the poet and legends of ancient kings" (Dawood 19). She is also the first woman in the frame story to be given a name, in contrast to the others who as adulteresses, are nameless, and with the exception of the Jinn's captive, also do not utter a word. The intrusion of Scheherazade brings about justice and reason into the plot of *The Arabian Nights*, where her stance as a therapist to Shahrayar's blood-thirst turns her into the voice of his *Ego*, and she restores a lost equilibrium within him and hence the kingdom. She does this through the monumental burden of telling a story every night, and leaving it either unfinished or starting another, so that the king may let her live to the next night. Her plan works for a long stretch of one thousand and one nights, before Shahrayar returns to his old self as a wise and rational man, allowing her to live with him as his wife without fear. Her stories are important; their function is not merely to pass the night and buy Scheherazade another day in the world of the living. They work therapeutically to heal the king, and widen his sphere of humanity that has narrowed to encompass an ideology of a strictly patriarchal society where women are excluded or executed.

The way she goes about telling these stories is also of utmost importance: they must be enticing, and must keep the king captivated enough to spare her for the completion of her tale which are initially "designed to teach, and it is striking how many of the tales feature adulterous women, virtuous women, dominant women, and wily women" (Irwin 159). Stories specifically about adultery are used by Scheherazade with the subtle insight of a would-be psychoanalyst, to lure him into confronting his own psychological ailments, whereby he may come to terms with the reasons behind the gender-war he has ignited. The presence of the adulteress in these stories she

recites is important in how it serves to show, in a therapeutic sense, the diversity in which women exist, teaching the blood-thirsty king that while fate has given him three adulteresses to cross his path, there are still just as many virtuous wives and maidens out there to counteract the existence of the unfaithful. She herself sets the example of a virtuous woman, one thousand and one nights after their marriage. By showing him that adultery indeed exists, as does fidelity and how they coexist in a community, her stories create

a counter hypnosis to the one afflicting Shahrayar and his state of mind; she can speak to him freely (through her stories), as she eventually does in the end [...] she also hints her role as a teacher to her children as soon as her boon is granted. The teacher in her speaks directly to the pupil, who has never before admitted to being one. (Naithani 279-280)

The pedagogical vibe that renders Scheherazade a “teacher” through her storytelling is somehow parallel to other collections of stories embedded within a frame story that preceded *The Arabian Nights*, including *The Panchatantra* and *Kalila wa-Dimna*⁵.

Sexuality and sensuality *must* be part of Scheherazade’s narratives, because her life is at the mercy of a man for which sexuality and all that is associated with it, including adultery, is the bigger part of his life. Sexual elements make the stories exciting and enticing in a sense that would keep him interested long enough to spare her life. Her purpose therefore *requires* her to enchant Shahrayar with erotic, comic, dramatic, and adventurous wonders, dragging him into a “somewhat bewildering labyrinth in which [he] as well as the reader are completely enmeshed” (Ghazoul 101). While both Vishnusharman, the narrator in *The Panchatantra*, and Scheherazade tell their stories, the purposes for the narrations are very different – “in *The Panchatantra*, the aim of the narrating Brahman is intelligent living, *savoir vivre*; in *The Arabian Nights*, the aim is plain living, *survivre*” (Ghazoul 102). Vishnusharman on the other hand, who as an elderly man makes it clear that “all the objects of sensual desire have lost their charm” does not need to resort to sexuality in his stories (Ryder 15). Sexuality becomes unsuitable in *The Panchatantra*,

because the whole point is “not to charm, but to instruct” (Ghazoul 101) the princes on how to be intelligent rulers. Stories of *The Arabian Nights* alternatively wander into voids of sexual descriptions, clearly suggesting that it was not made for students, but rather, for an adult audience – a king who has had enough sex to remain un-shocked (although still very entertained) by the vivid descriptions and occasionally explicit subject matter. Phrases such as “he tossed her to the ground and enjoyed her” (Zipes 6) suggest that *The Arabian Nights* didn’t really belong to the world of “polite literature” (Leeming 326).

The stories told to Shahrayar sugar-coat the ‘lessons’ Scheherazade attempts to slip into his system. The stories are complex and varied, and because they “recede into fathomless depths [...] it is therefore not so much about discovery as a process of *recovery*” (Ghazoul 105). One of the most important stories narrated by Scheherazade is *The Enchanted King* – the story of a woman married to a king, whom she drugs every night. She leaves him sleeping and goes to see her paramour, who is described as a “pitch-black, thick-lipped Negro” (Dawood 99), and with whom she is madly in love. This story in particular is one of the most important narrations: it is the story of a cuckolded king, whose wife betrays him with a black slave, creating an uncanny resemblance to Shahrayar’s own story. This narrative comes a little later in Scheherazade’s series of stories, where it is cloaked in the folds of another story, and whereby it is slipped into her general display of the ‘all-types’ of women in which she attempts to portray.

Scheherazade portrays this king in a fashion that makes him a victim – he loves his wife, who also happens to be his cousin, and he is both a caring and gracious husband. Nothing is said of why his wife, who also happens to be a witch of sorts, would want to be adulterous except for her uncanny love for this slave who is described in the text as both a “cut-throat” and “thief” – and it is made clear that her love for another has nothing to do with how well or how badly her husband treats her. There seems to be no obvious need for revenge against her husband, and if

anything, the slave treats her terribly, calling her vile names such as “white whore” and “execrable whore,” suggesting the possibility that the slave himself is seeking some kind of symbolic revenge that has to do with social difference. While the slave possesses no obvious supernatural powers, he has somehow brainwashed the queen into calling him her “master,” creating further pun upon the class differences depicted in this story; he, a slave and thief, copulating with the “white” queen whom he treats as if she were trash and who calls him her master. A picture as such however could very well be a ploy created by Scheherazade, who purposely depicts a story that thoroughly reduces the stance of the slave to make him appear in the worst light possible, allowing Shahrivar somehow to bask in how there is a world of difference between himself and the slave with whom his wife cuckolds him.

The king in this story is completely oblivious until he accidentally overhears his maids speaking: “Allah’s curse upon all adulteresses!.. but how should he suspect her when every night she mixes in his cup a potent drug which so benumbs his senses that he sleeps like the dead till morning?” (Dawood 99). When he secretly pours away the contents of his drug and pretends to sleep, he hears his wife speak; “sleep, may you never wake again! O how I abhor you! My soul sickens at the sight of you” (Dawood 99). The queen not only cuckolds her husband, but also literally wishes – and does – him physical harm; via the drug, her verbal wishes for his death, and afterwards with her torture tactics. She turns the lower half of his body into stone, and whips him daily, and then covers the lashes with a hair-coat to magnify the pain.

While her adultery seems not to be borne of patriarchal restraint, she seems to go a little overboard in her methods of torture. Inevitably, the questions arise: why does she hate her husband and wish him dead? Why does she revel in the physical pain that she inflicts on his body? Why does she make sure he is still in pain long after she is gone? And more importantly, why is she madly in love with the “pitch-black, thick-lipped” slave that treats her like an

“execrable whore?” In this story, Scheherazade re-creates the queen-slave drama for Shahrayar but strategically leaves out details that may make the cuckolded king in her story appear responsible for his wife’s behavior in any way. For Shahrayar’s sake, and for the sake of his therapy, the king in this story is faultless, and the queen is evil. The narrative avoids the question of why the queen resorts to betrayal and sadism. As readers we are given no reason as to why she prefers rags over riches, the cut-throat slave over a king, and being an “execrable whore” over a queen. She mourns and weeps for the slave when he is slain and handicapped by her husband, and turns into a dangerous witch when she discovers that her husband was responsible. She is, plainly, faithful to her lover, where she both mourns and nurses him, and inflicts bodily harm upon her husband for his sake. She also turns the entire kingdom to stone, reflecting the magnitude of her anger, and also touching on the same inflictions which Shahrayar had made upon his own kingdom. On a larger scale, the queen’s actions here suggest that often anger that tweaks at one’s love, pride or honor is usually large enough to engulf an entire kingdom in the embraces of its wrath, where both she and Shahrayar serve as the perfect example.

As readers we cannot fathom that which prompts the adultery in the tale of *The Enchanted King*. But we can assume several scenarios, including the hatred strong enough to empower the queen in question. Like the adulterous wives in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, we can easily assume that her actions resulted from the parts of the story which are not narrated – the oppression resulting from patriarchal domination; the seclusion of the Harem, the exclusive sexual control, and the feelings of being owned, subordinated, inferior, or trapped, as opposed to the open orgy-like sexuality of the slave and his friends. While this story too sees the absence of a scenario as such, we can understand from the queen’s intense words, which are also akin to the speech of the Jinn’s captive in terms of this intense hatred they possess, that the king may have done something to ignite her loathing.

A feminist reading of her actions suggest that she does not torture her king merely out of love for the slave, but rather, that the crux of her wrath is in the punishment she chooses for her king – she turns his lower half into stone, which in itself suggests that her hatred (and perhaps her obsession with the slave) has underlying sexual connotations, where her curse clearly suggests impotency. She could have damned the king to a million other things, including death (which would have been easier, since she had wished him dead in the first place), and yet chooses his lower half, not his top half, to render entirely useless. Of course it gives her the upper hand of being able to torture his body with ease, but the interpretation of her decision is entirely symbolic. She chooses to freeze his legs, so that he may not walk, hence killing his mobility; she chooses to freeze his genitals, so that he may no longer copulate, hence killing the traditional notion of manhood and also pride; she chooses to freeze his kingdom, so that he may rule nothing, hence killing his sense of wealth, fortune, and ownership; she chooses to freeze him to his throne, so that she may torture him upon it – hence killing his sense of authority and switching it with her own, where she becomes the possessor, the sadist, and the inflictor of pain. Again the notion of role-switching arises, where the queen here is in power and renders the king entirely helpless. Like Shahrayar who has taken over the feminine domain of the night through his killings, the queen here has taken over the male domain of the day, where she alternates between torturing her husband and nursing her lover. She becomes both man and woman in this sense, until she herself is slain and the enchanted king is rescued.

The enchanted king's wife at some level portrays the opposite side of treachery and deceit: she is incredibly faithful to her lover, despite his class and physical ailments, suggesting that while women have the capacity to be treacherous, they also have it in them to be the opposite, creating once again the duality of character and the archetype of Eve and Mary, but at a very internal level; namely, that this duality is housed within the makeup of every woman, in how she can be both faithful and cunning. The patriarchal interventions that dominate women, leash them, or

render them an item for ownership can very well be interpreted as attempts to suppress the “treacherous” side of the female character. In the case of these adulteresses, it only makes matters worse.

The motif of trickery, as well as the female dual nature, arises again in Scheherazade’s story entitled *The Young Woman and her Five Lovers*, where the lonely wife, due to her husband’s prolonged absence, “succumbed to the temptation of the flesh and fell in love with a handsome youth who himself loved her dearly” (Dawood 106). This story represents a different kind of trickery, where the wife in question does not go about ‘cuckolding’ her husband behind his back, but rather, falls in love after years of being alone. To get the man she loves out of prison, she uses her “cunning” side. She uses the power of her femininity and the promise of carnal pleasures to lure national officials – the Governor, the Cadi, the Vizier, and the King respectfully, as well as the carpenter who builds her a five-compartment closet. She tricks them all, bringing them to her house one by one under the impression that she will do their sexual bidding, and locking them in the individual compartments right before they can ‘take’ their prize. Though she uses herself as a bait in order to release her lover, she doesn’t cheat on him, but rather, ‘cheats’ the series of powerful (and not so powerful) men who think they can buy and trade sexual favors with a woman in need of help, or again, a damsel in distress. Far from being the damsel, however, the woman leaves these great men imprisoned in the compartment for three days, reflecting her own brainy powers and how she lured, tricked, and punished them – from carpenter to king – with naught but her feminine defenses. The young woman represents the dual side of the woman – both the femme fatal and the damsel in distress, the carnal allure as well as the intellectual power, and deceit (by law she is still married even though her husband is away) and faithfulness (for she goes to great measures to rescue her lover).

Again, as implied in the story of the Jinn's captive and the enchanted king's wife, the power roles are switched, where men of the government become 'prisoners', and she their captor. Ironically, the fact that she made them all take off their uniforms and weaponry, and change into other more effeminate clothes, suggests also that she stripped them of the identity signified by their attire – the powers associated with their uniforms gone, which, in turn, makes her even more powerful in terms of how she is able to 'strip' their powers away. The notion of female trickery, or treachery, is a leitmotif in *The Arabian Nights*, though Scheherazade also presents the other face of women in her tales. Deceitfulness exists in the three women of *The Arabian Nights* frame story as well as in the adulteresses of the embedded narratives. The treachery associated with cuckolding the oblivious husband is also a notion that has been included in folk and medieval Islamic culture⁶.

The Canterbury Tales in Context

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* portray the broader influence which *The Arabian Nights* had on European literature (Irwin 96-97). Both *The Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales* are structurally similar; both begin with a frame that encompasses a multitude of other stories, and while the stories vary from romantic, political, religious, educational, to supernatural, they also depict the types of women – incredibly saintly, or incredibly wonton, where the question of female fidelity is weaved into the heart of the narratives. The nature of the frame here differs: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reflect the passing of time during a pilgrimage where there are many people involved. *The Arabian Nights* involves only Scheherazade and Shahrayar, where the stories are essential in terms of life and death for the narrator. Chaucer's work, written several centuries after *The Arabian Nights*, has inherited the adulterous wife as a principle character in some of its tales. But in the analysis of several stories encompassed within the

frame, it is safe to say that Chaucer, unlike his predecessors, was in fact somewhat sympathetic towards women and their plights when it came to fidelity and adultery. While the stories are written in an oral fashion meant for entertainment and passing time, underlying it are many messages regarding how women, despite the ‘good-versus-bad’ stereotypes and ‘saint-versus-slut’ archetypes, have various shades of grey and even colors amidst their static portrayal. Chaucer delivers an iconic and ironic portrayal of the vast array of women in medieval English society. Inevitably, Chaucer also portrays a variety of male character types, creating a “unique opportunity for exploring issues of gender from both a historical and contemporary perspective” (Cornelius 69), creating a wider scope for deciphering the social and conjugal gendered roles of both men *and* women in the realms of feminist – and also anti-feminist – criticism.

The themes of female fidelity, adultery, and cuckoldry prevail in Chaucer’s overall portrayal of female characters. One of the first portrayals of an unfaithful wife is in *The Miller’s Tale*, where the husband was “jalous he was, and heeld hire [his wife] narwe in cage, / For she was wilde, and yong, and he was old, / And demed himself ben lyk a cokewold [jealous and kept (his wife) on a short leash, for she was wild and young and he was old and judged himself near to being a cuckold]” (Chaucer 151).⁷ This story in particular stands out amongst the others in how the Miller explains to the other pilgrims that while he is about to tell them a story of an adulterous wife, Alison, she does not represent a model for all wives: “Ther been ful gode wyves many oon, / And ever a thousand gode ayeys oon badde; / That knowestow wel thyself, but if thou madde [there are a great many good wives, always a thousand good ones to a bad one; you know that perfectly well yourself, unless you’re crazy]” (Chaucer 148). Chaucer’s Miller therefore implies that the adulterous wife is not the norm, but rather, the *exception*. Hence, because the adulterous wife steps out of the social norm and the assigned gender-role of a faithful and obedient wife, she immediately makes a subject for a good story. The Miller understands that the human mind lusts for a great tale, and will thrive not on one of a sweet and faithful wife, but

on the tales of a scandal. A story told merely about the norm is uninteresting – hence the narrator opts for leaving out the one thousand “gode ayeyns” and instead telling the story of the bad exception. This notion is exactly what Scheherazade had tried to achieve through her prolific storytelling in *The Arabian Nights*, where in her narratives she attempts to single out his former queen as the bad exception in a world of good women.

The Miller’s few words before he recites his story create an excellent balance for the abundance of adulterous characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. This suggests that Chaucer wrote these tales with a particular view that defies the stereotype of medieval women’s unfaithful nature. Characters such as Pleasant Nicholas on the other hand, who relentlessly chases Alison for her affections and who is described as someone who “of derne love he coude, and of solas; / And therto he was sleigh and ful of privee, / and lyk a mayden meke for to see [knew all about secret love and pleasurable consultations, / and besides, he was sly and very discreet, / and looked as meek as a maiden]” (Chaucer 150), suggest that while not all women are adulterous, then definitely not all men are victims to the alleged female deceitfulness, and instead have their own share of cunning. Indeed, Nicholas pursues Alison both emotionally and physically:

And prively he caughte hir by the queynte,
And seyde, ‘y-wis, but if ich have my wille,
For derne love of thee, lemman, I spille.’
And heeld hir harde by the haunche-bones,
And seyde, ‘lemman, love me al at-ones,
Or I wol dyen, also God me save!
And she sprong as a colt doth in the trave,
And with hir heed she wryed faste away,
And seyde, ‘I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey.
Why, lat be,’ quod she, ‘lat be, Nicholas!
Or I wol crye ‘out, harrow’ and ‘alas’.
Do wey your handes, for your curteisye!’ (Chaucer 154).

[he grabbed her where he shouldn’t
and said ‘unless I have my way with you,
sweetheart, I am sure to die of suppressed love’.
And he held her hard by the hips
And said ‘Sweetheart, love me right away
Or I’ll die, so God help me!’

She jumped like a cold imprisoned within a shoeing frame,
and twisted her head away hard
and said 'I wont kiss you, on my faith;
why let be,' she said, 'let it be, Nicholas,
or I'll cry 'help' and 'alas!'
Take away your hands; where are your manners!]

We meet a woman, here, who initially is not open to adultery. Her refusal suggests immediately that she does not fit into the sexually-open reputation that has flanked the female character in medieval tales, undermining hence the stereotype. Chaucer presents Pleasant Nicholas as the villain in this story, where he lures a good and faithful woman with charms and promises of love which Alison, in her marriage to an elderly and overly-protective man, is deprived of. His character also suggests that looks can be deceiving; he looks as “meek as a maiden” when in reality he is “sly.” Pleasant Nicholas catalyzes another switch in gender roles: while typically in the medieval texts it is women that look meek but are unbelievably cunning and can deceive men with only the slightest feminine defenses, it is the wife here who falls for Pleasant Nicholas’s charms, cunningly being drawn to him through a kind of emotional manipulation that makes her unable to refuse: “This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye, / And spak so faire, and profred hir so faste, / That she hir love him graunted atte laste [This Nicholas started begging for her mercy / and spoke so prettily and pushed himself so hard / that she finally granted him her love]” (Chaucer 154). Despite her initial refusal, the fact that Alison gives in to the charms of another man immediately switches the roles again – her husband is rendered a cuckold, and she an adulterous wife who ingeniously looks for ways to cuckold him.

The reasons prompting her adulteries can be seen from various perspectives. Her simple-minded and “jealous” husband kept her on a rather strong “leash,” where the confinement she faces immediately suggests that because she is young then she *must* be mistrusted and therefore secluded, to protect her from her potential waywardness. It can be said that Alison’s adultery was made in attempt to escape that confinement, and that while she did not go in voluntary

pursuit of love outside of her marriage, she gave in to the offers of love from another, suggesting that it is deprivation of love from her husband in the first place that led her to seizing it once it crossed her path, where “the discrepancy in age again prevents reciprocal affection and obligation; no where does Alison express any interest in her husband” (Jacobs 368). Of course the constant courting of Pleasant Nicholas had a great deal to do with her change of heart. Just as women were typically able to bend men to their will, so was Pleasant Nicholas able to make her fall in love with him, where her strong affections both rendered her capable of deceiving her husband and immune to the whims of another admirer, Absalom, who also relentlessly pursued her. While the Miller’s story was meant merely as entertainment for the crowd of pilgrims, and also despite his introduction that indicates clearly how a thousand to one women were good and faithful, Chaucer’s empathy towards women is obvious and “particularly likely to be on the side of the woman in a situation where a young woman was married to an older man [...] expressing the idea that young (and beautiful) women should not be monopolized by older men” (Karras 94).

The motif of older men with much younger wives is not new to medieval European narratives. It is a recurring theme in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, where female infidelity is also an underlying motif. One particular story in the *Decameron* clearly suggests that it is against nature for a young woman to marry a much older man. The story tells of an old man who constantly makes excuses for why he cannot sleep with his wife. She eventually takes on a much younger lover who while sates her sexual needs, portrays how significantly older husbands cannot possibly keep up with the virility of younger women, just as an older woman cannot keep up with the virility and sexual needs of a much younger husband. The same idea is stressed in *The Perfumed Garden*, where it is stated

coition with an old woman, it acts like a fatal poison. It has been said “do not rummage old women, were they as rich as Karoun”. And it has been further said, “beware of mounting old women if they cover you with favors”. And again, “the

coitus of an old woman is a venomous meal” [...] an older woman than himself will sap him of his strength. (Dunn 89)

To the advantage of women at the time, Nafzawi’s *The Perfumed Garden*, a classic work on erotica in medieval Islamic culture, offered men advice on how to physically please their partners so that they may mutually enjoy the pleasures of copulation. To their disadvantage, however, it did not give heed to how women may be affected in a marriage to older men. On the contrary, it encourages men to go for younger women: “know that a man who works a woman younger than himself acquires new vigor” (Dunn 89), reminding us again that *The Perfumed Garden* is a manual for the benefit of men only. Chaucer’s narratives suggest that “an old man with a young wife was more or less asking for trouble – not necessarily because young women are especially sinful, but because old men who are so lascivious that they imagine they can satisfy a wife are ridiculous” (Karras 95). But it is only in the *Decameron* that the notion of old men taking young wives is openly discouraged, and where the text advocates that the sexuality of a woman must be put into consideration. Sensitivity as such towards female sexual needs is a notion often void in other medieval works of literature, even though there arises the question of whether Boccaccio really intended to take female sexuality into serious consideration for her own well-being and happiness, or whether he warned against a union with younger women to save older men from being rendered cuckolds.

With the unsatisfied wives that Chaucer had portrayed in several stories in *The Canterbury Tales*, most of which seem to succumb to the dotes of a young wooer, the prospect of these women having originally married in the name of love or with full consent is farfetched. Instead, marriage was more of a contract, or a business deal, whereby there would be some kind of benefit to both parties: the security and protection of a home and stable income for a young wife, and a producer of offspring as well as a pleasure object in terms of the husband. While this marital contract ensures these stable points for both husband and wife, “adultery flows naturally

between people who regard each other as bearers of so many worldly goods. When there is no comprehension of the other as an individual, there can be no companionship, and adultery is the inevitable result of a healthy animal” (Jacobs 338). Ironically, church laws advocated that sexual relations between a married couple must and should take place in order to avoid “misdeeds” on the part of either husband or wife, and hence, the marital contract was, initially, a sexual contract as well. In Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* and *Miller’s tale*, we meet two wives that marry much older men, and by terms of their marital contract must deliver their marital “debt” – sexual availability. In the days of Chaucer, that sexual debt was so imperative in the realm of marriage that by law, husbands were entitled to take their wives out of monasteries and nunneries to sate their sexual urges. Similarly, women could sometimes obtain the release of husbands from military operations to render the sexual debt – in both cases, it was considered better to have sex in a monogamous fashion rather than give in to adultery (Jacobs 340).

The question remains however: what happens if a husband fails to render the debt? What, if in his old age, he is impotent or unwell, or even absent? We understand that the Merchant in Chaucer’s tale prized having sex with young women whom he considered “fresh meat,” and boasted about his sexuality. In terms of the Miller however, there is no talk of his virility, and very little reference to a sex-life between himself and Alison. In a situation as such, where sexual needs are not met, “the law provides no remedy; faced with say, spouses disabled by age or illness, husbands absent on business for years, pilgrims taken without spousal consent, or simply an uncooperative husband (the desires of an uncooperative wife were disregarded), the law could only council sufferance” (Jacobs 338-339), and hence, a wife in a situation as such – who according to law needs sex as much as her husband does – takes the law into her own hands. Adultery therefore, seemed liked a compensatory means through which a wife could make up for her marital misery and counteract a bad “contract” so to speak. While this compensation “was legally forbidden, Chaucer seems willing to entertain it as an acceptable

situation” (Jacobs 341), particularly if a wife has been abandoned by her husband, either sexually or otherwise.

In *The Arabian Nights*, husbandly absence is also a feature that prompts adultery – such as in the *Young Woman and her Five Lovers*. In Chaucer, we understand that the Miller is absent for days at a time on business, and in other tales, such as the *Franklin’s Tale*, a husband travels and leaves his wife for extended periods of time. By the standards of the church, sexual abandonment as such is akin to widowing, where primarily, a marital contract is based on the legalization of sex and eventually childbearing, until “death do them part.” In the absence of the husband, it seems inevitable that some kind of sexual mischief would happen on the wife’s part, as a result of loneliness or a need for revenge. In Chaucer’s tales, he inevitably presses the argument;

marital law tended to treat marriage as a sexual contract which partners must rely on, since they were limited to a single supplier [...] but what if your supplier went bankrupt? In a business venture, the defrauded party would offer its business to another contractor [...] Suppose husbands persist in displeasing God by “widowing” their wives for years at a time? Do they not free their wives to repair the marital contract as best they may? (Jacobs 340)

Medieval patriarchal norms did not stop Chaucer or others from hinting through their narratives that in the face of marrying elderly men or being trapped in a loveless marriage where confinement, mistrust, mistreatment or absence was a probability, adultery was as a result also probable. Within the medieval culture in the day of Chaucer, there were also a few hints “that people in Western Europe (or at least the women themselves) thought it was sometimes excusable. Literary texts do not reflect social practice on issues like this, but they do reveal the limits of what people in the culture could imagine or sympathize with” (Karras 90). Despite these sympathies, however, depictions of women in literary texts abided very much by the same stereotypes that throughout the centuries have suggested that women are prone to adultery in general without a catalyst to prompt their actions.

The Arabian Nights and the *Canterbury Tales* depend a great deal on the character of the adulterous wife, where in the fictional domain the plots unravel in and around their presence. While it was generally advocated that women were the weaker sex, they were still very much considered dangerous. Through flaunting their sexuality, they could easily master power over men – a notion that was suggested by the Wife of Bath, who said that she used her sexuality to manipulate her husband into getting what she wants. This dangerous sexuality was acknowledged, contributing to the reasons that called for oppression of women and the sexual power they wielded. Through religious vocation women were conditioned into being obedient to their husbands and expected to be faithful and pious, and in turn, husbands had to keep a close eye on their wives constantly since the stereotypes affixed to women suggested that the majority of them are prone to sin, and only a few exceptions are saintly. A wife's actions had to be monitored and accounted for, including public appearances and how she adorned herself in front of others because of the general fear that "women who go out in public put themselves on display for sexual purposes" (Karras 90).⁸

While it may have not been accepted, Chaucer still succeeds in reflecting his own less empathetic attitudes towards adulterous women. He creates the motif of an older man with much younger wife once again in his *Merchant's Tale*, where an old man's faithful and unwilling wife is eventually wooed by the honeyed words of an admirer. While the Miller had carefully chose words that sided with women in his introduction, the Merchant alternatively unleashes a full-blown testimony about how cruel his own wife is and how terrible marriage can be. He tells the story of a sixty year-old man named January, and his wife May, in her twenties. He warns: "And if thou take a wyf unto thyn hold, / Ful lightly maystow been a cokewold [if you take a wife into your keeping, / you may very easily become a cuckold]" (Chaucer 244). The couple's name is symbolic of their age and nature; the husband's name, January, is the month of cold, drear and

rain, withered trees and barren lands; May on the other hand, is between spring and summer. Her name incorporates blossoming, the color in the flowers, trees, sunshine, warmth and passion, and is also symbolic of reproduction and growth. Combining the two opposites together immediately foretells of trouble.

Through January, Chaucer offers again the unfavorable side of the male sex: he describes January's need to marry only in terms of sexual possession, saying that she must be young, and that a woman over thirty is revolting for him, where

And bet than old boef is the tender veel:
I wol no womman thritty yeer of age
[...]
For if so were I hadde swich mischaunce
That I in hire ne coude han no plesaunce,
Thanne sholde I lede my lyf in avoutrye,
And go streight to the devel whan I dye. (Chaucer 250)

[But tender veal is better than old beef.
I don't want a woman of thirty years of age
[...]
For if it were to happen that I had such a misfortune
as not to take any pleasure in my wife,
then I should lead my life in adultery
and go straight to the devil when I die]

The irony of his words resides in how he is willing to allow himself the pleasures of "fresh meat" to fulfill his own sexual desires, but does not think twice about how a wife as young as twenty will feel about a husband who is forty years her senior. During copulation, "she obeyeth, be hire lief or looth [she obeyed, whether it was agreeable to her or loathsome]" (Chaucer 274), suggesting further that for January, May was no more than a sex-object or commodity designed for his consumption. Her consent, or lack thereof, was ignored and her own pleasure was void, and hence, what January wants in marriage is not so much a woman, but "an unconscious female, an instrument in the service of his sanctioned lust" (Murtaugh 480). Further irony resides in how he claims he must have the pleasures of young flesh or otherwise wallow in the

sins of adultery. Exactly the reverse happens when his wife opts for the younger squire Damien, leaving January as the “old beef” that in theory he had proclaimed to shun. She is caught up in adultery, where she would rather “go straight to the devil” than be with the husband that both uses and confines her. Indeed, January “has nothing as a husband that May could possibly desire, and so there can be no mutual obligation between them” (Jacobs 337).

In *The Canterbury Tales*, allocated physical spaces are the means of female confinement to secure control, but not dispel in themselves jealousy and mistrust. This is not only because of the stereotypes that suggest women are incapable of exercising self-control where their sexuality is concerned, but more importantly, because of the insecurities that a non-confined woman may inspire in a husband. There was a “generalized fear and distrust of female independence – reflective perhaps of high medieval society in which there were substantial opportunities for women, both among the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, to wield power” (Karras 89). In the *Merchant’s Tale*, May is trapped, where her husband “made a gardin walled al with stoon [built a garden walled on all sides with stone]” (Chaucer 276), giving an image of captivity. While the garden, much like the one in *The Arabian Nights*, is meant to be a safe-haven in the heart of an abode, the fact that the adulteries take place there suggests the unstable foundations on which the marital home is built. In the *Merchant’s Tale*, there is no love involved – the marriage is merely one of convention for January whose only concerns are to have his shallow desires fulfilled, and feels malevolence if they are not. When he goes blind, his sense of possessiveness is magnified, as is his insecurity, for he suffers not only of old age, but he is also handicapped. He feels the need to confine May further, where the walls of his garden act as a reassurance that his wife will remain close by in captivity;

He wepeth and he wayleth pitously;
And therewithal the fyr of jalousye,
Lest that his wyf sholde falle in som folye,
So brente his herte that he wolde fayn
That som man bothe hire and him had slayn

[...]
 But evere live as widwe in clothes blake,
 Soul as the turtle that hath lost hir make.
 [...]
 Which jalousye it was so outrageous
 That neither in halle, n'in noon other hous,
 Ne in noon other place, neverthemo,
 He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go,
 But if that he hadde hand on hire alway. (Chaucer 278-280)

[He wept and wailed piteously,
 and besides, the fire of jealousy,
 for fear his wife would fall into some folly,
 so burned his heart that he would have been glad
 had someone slain both her and himself;
 [...]
 He wanted her to live ever after as widow in black,
 alone as the dove that has lost her mate.
 [...]
 The jealousy was so excessive
 that even in his all or any other house
 or any other place,
 he would not allow her to go in any manner
 unless he always kept a hand on her]

Chaucer delves into the psyche of a man who really does seem to understand that old age and decrepit physical state are a threat to his ownership of his wife. Even in his disability, he cannot handle the prospect of setting her free and hence develops an iron grip to keep her caged. Despite his efforts at chaining her to his side, May must rely on her intelligence to break free of such confinement. The fact that she and her lover Damien had come to an understanding of sorts by “rouninge thurgh a wal [whispering through the walls]” (Chaucer 282) suggests that the foundations of possession and imprisonment upon which those walls were built are unstable, and hence most likely to be breached. In January’s garden, and in the garden of the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, the surrounding walls are not broken into from the outside, but it is the woman trapped on the inside that finds a way to let a foreign body into the premises. This indicates also that if she cannot go outside, the outside would be brought to her. May allows the breach in order to escape the groping hands of her husband who after turning blind, hounds her and controls her every move. When their needs are unfulfilled, their every move watched, and

their desires taboo, the women in these two texts seem to present adultery as if attempting to regain a fulfilled womanhood that seems to have been lost through the realms of marriage. In adultery, their consent and desires suddenly become valid, where there are no patriarchal chains that bind them.

In both the *Miller's Tale* and the *Merchant's Tale*, the wife is guilty of adultery. But unlike in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*, Chaucer offers reasons within the narratives that lead up to the adulteries. The women protagonists of his tales do not end up punished. The contrary happens, where the wives carry on with their lives, either with an oblivious husband, or with their lovers, or juggling both. Chaucer creates a scenario that makes it “relatively easy to sympathize with an adulterous wife when her husband is a solitary miser who rarely shows real interest in her” (Jacobs 344). In the *Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer indicates this sympathy when he brings ancient Greek authorities into the plot – namely the gods Pluto and Proserpina. They emerge in the garden where the adultery takes place between May and Damien, up in a pear tree, while her blind husband stands below.⁹ The intervention of these gods suggests again that the act of adultery is an age-old moral quandary that existed as far as literature has been recorded. The argument that takes place between the two gods is also very telling of the multiple sides of the story, as well as the unfavorable stereotypes that plague the reputation of women, which the ancient god Pluto recites; “‘My wyf,’ quod he, ‘ther may no wight seye nay; / Th’experience so preveth every day / The treson whiche that wommen doon to man. / Ten hondred thousand tales tellen I can / Notable of your untrouthe and brotilnesse [my wife, no one may contradict this; / experience proves every day / the treachery women commit against men. / I can tell ten hundred thousand stories / which are remarkable for your infidelity and fickleness]” (Chaucer 286). In his rage against the adultery taking place right in front of January, Pluto decides to temporarily restore the blind man’s eyesight so that he will see the infidelity for himself. Before Pluto speaks however, Chaucer introduces Proserpina as the woman whom Pluto had “ravished out of Etna /

Whyl that she gadered floures in the mede [whom he had ravished away from Mount Aetna / while she was gathering flowers]” (Chaucer 286), reminding us of the Jinn’s captive in *The Arabian Nights*, and how the two women share the similar plight of having been taken away from the world of the living and into the realms of the supernatural. The irony of Pluto’s words resides in how he is known to be in the company of “many a lady,” and while giving himself the authority to kidnap and ravish women, he still has the audacity to complain about their treachery. Similarly, January has the audacity to worry about his soul if he falls into adultery, while he enjoys the body of a young woman without giving any heed to *her* soul or acknowledging her as a person, rather than an object. Pluto’s words spark anger in Proserpina, who takes offense and immediately defends the adulterous wife by counteracting Pulto’s anti-feminist satire;

“Now by my modres sires soule I swere
 That I shal yeven hire suffisant answer,
 And alle wommen after for hir sake,
 That, though they be in any gilt y-take,
 With face bold they shulle hemself excuse,
 And bere hem down that wolden hem accuse:
 for lakke of answer noon of hem shal dyen.
 Al hadde man seyn a thing with bothe his yen,
 Yit shul we wommen visage it hardily,
 And wepe, and swere, and chyd subtilly,
 So that ye men shul been as lewed as gees —
 What rekketh me youre auctoritees?” (Chaucer 288)

[“Now by the soul of my mother’s father I swear
 that I shall give a good enough answer to her,
 and to all women thereafter, for her sake,
 so that, even if they are taken in the guilty act,
 they shall bold facedly give an excuse for themselves
 and bear down those that would accuse them:
 none of them shall die for lack of an answer.
 Even if a man has seen a thing with both eyes,
 yet shall we women face it out confidently
 and weep, and take our oath and scold deviously,
 so that you men will be as ignorant as geese —
 what do I care about your authorities?”]

Her divine intervention is the salvation of May, and also of all women. Her attitude of defiance against the authority that threatens her gender resembles that of the Jinn's captive, where their open words suggest that the reputed cunning nature of women, which men in these stories so often refer to, *will* emerge when women are wronged. Proserpina also suggests that even if women's infidelities are real, then it is because their men deserve it. She enforces May with the power of "excuse," convincing him against all evidence that her infidelity is an illusion of his newly restored eyesight.

Perhaps one of the most compelling characters in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Wife of Bath who, much like Proserpina, acts as the defender of women, and offers important insights into the representations of the medieval woman. Her character is a controversial one, and male characters in *The Canterbury Tales* for the most part choose to "ignore the Wife of Bath or react to her in mock terror" (Cornelius 70). Modern day critics are divided about her, some believing that her talkativeness invokes a kind of female authority, because unlike the stereotypical meekness associated with her gender, she is "assertive and expansive; she spreads herself and dilates" (Martin 467), speaking openly and even aggressively about sexuality, religion, and gender issues between men and women. Others, however, and particularly feminist critics, believe that her stories demonstrate how women are exploited by men and how despite her knowledge in terms of marriage, sexuality, and the wants of women, still inspires an "adherence to a patriarchal idea of wifely faithfulness" (Lee 17).

Like the frame tale of *The Arabian Nights*, the Wife of Bath's story begins with a violation of chastity, the rape of a maiden. The rapist is a knight who is initially condemned to death for his dishonorable act, but the queen intervenes, switching the power-roles, where what begins "with an act of unjust male domination, quickly turns the table on the male sexual offender... placing him under woman's domination" (Sturges 45). While she does indeed turn the tables and bend

the knight to her will, her tale suggests a trivialization of rape which was characteristic of medieval English society. Though a legal felony officially punishable by castration, blinding, and also hanging, “in social practice [rape] was regarded only as a misdemeanor, so that rape cases were often not tried, and most rapists were acquitted by English judges,” leaving hence a string of “uncompensated female victims” in a “medieval patriarchal society” (Lee 17) that prized pre-marital chastity, but did little to protect it. While the Knight in this tale is condemned to death (and eventually pardoned) for his violation, he is not really depicted as a villain in the tale. His characterization is humorous and lighthearted, but never as aggressive or deplorable as portrayals tended to be of an adulterous wife for example. This demonstrates that the moral standards of medieval society were more likely to turn against a woman for committing adultery than to condemn a man who is a rapist and who through his violation has potentially ruined a maiden’s future by obstructing her path to decent matrimony.

The Knight is given a second chance at life by the queen, on one condition – “‘Thou standest yet,’ quod she, ‘in swich array / That of thy lyf yet hastow no suretee. / I grante thee lyf if thou canst tellen me / What thing is it that wommen most desyren’ [you are still in such a position’ says she, / ‘that you have no guarantee of your life as yet. / I will grant you life if you can tell me / what thing it is that women most desire’]” (Chaucer 222) – a request whose answer seems to become the crux of the entire tale, and at a wider level, the question which Chaucer has raised for his readers also: what do women really want? While a patriarchal perspective on an answer as such may prompt material answers such as money, safety, marriage, and a home, the Wife of Bath in her prologue and throughout her narration of the story drops her answers onto her listeners, which for the main part suggest that women’s desires are mostly psychological and emotional. She explains that she said to one of her husbands:

“Thou shalt nat bothe, thogh that thou were wood,
Be maister of my body and of my good;

That oon thou shalt forgo, maugree thyne yen.
 What helpeth it of me to enquire or spyen?
 I trowe, thou woldest loke me in thy cheste!
 Thou sholdest seye, ‘Wyf, go where thee leste;
 Tak your disport; I wol nat leve no talis.
 I knowe yow for a trewe wyf, dame Alis’.
 We love no man that taketh kepe or charge
 Wher that we goon; we wol ben at our large.” (Chaucer 196)

[“you shall not be master of both my body and my goods,
 even if you rage with anger.
 You’ll go without one of them, like it or not.
 What use is it to snoop on me and spy on me?
 I think you’d like to lock me in your chest!
 You should say, ‘wife, go where you like;
 amuse yourself; I wont believe any gossip.
 I know you are a true wife, Dame Alice’.
 We don’t love a man who carefully watches
 where we go; we want to be at large.”]

She acknowledges a man’s unconscious desire for a metaphorical bondage of his wife, exemplified through the “chest” and also reflective of the Jinn’s chest in the frame story of *The Arabian Nights*. From the perspective of the Wife, who speaks on behalf of her gender, what women desire most are *trust, freedom, individuality, and sovereignty*. Having gone through five marriages and endured men that were miserly or abusive, the Wife of Bath speaks from her own personal experiences. She suggests that from containment either rebellion can be born or a weakness of the moral will, where a woman may go to the first soft words that beckons her – “I wol nat lye; / A man shal winne us best with flaterye, / And with attendance and with bisnesse / Been we y’lymed [I will not lie; / a man can win us best with flattery, / and with constant attendance and assiduity, / we are ensnared]” (Chaucer 224), which is exactly what happens with the young wives in both *The Miller’s Tale* and *The Merchant’s Tale*. In addition to the trust, freedom, and individuality that women generally crave in a conjugal relationship, the Wife also touches upon one of the oldest traits of human psychology, that which is forbidden will always be yearned for: “We wommen han, if that I shal nat lye, / In this matere a queynte fantasye; / Wayte what thing we may nat lightly have, / Thereafter wol we crye al day and crave. / Forbede

us thing, and that desyren we; / Prees on us faste, and thanne wol we flee [we women have, to tell the truth, / an odd fancy in this matter; / whatever we cannot easily get, / we will cry after and crave all day. / Forbid us a thing, and we desire it. / Press it upon us, and then we will flee]” (Chaucer 204). Her words immediately reflect the biblical archetype of Eve, who defied the word of God and bid Adam to take the forbidden apple, suggesting that it is in female nature to seek that which is forbidden, and not just the apple, but extramarital liaisons too. Taken from a different perspective, it could also be said that as Eve had been the reason Adam had picked the forbidden apple, then she is responsible for his fall from heaven; and therefore, since Eve has passed on her traits to all women, then women are the cause for the fall of man.

But is it not in the nature of both genders to seek that which is forbidden? Surely enough, it was never a trait strictly limited to women. In addition to the adulterous wives in *The Canterbury Tales*, there are also a number of adulterous men, including one of the Wife’s five husbands. Even the Merchant had attested to how he would voluntarily fall into the whirlwinds of adultery if he were to take a wife over thirty years of age. But the adulteries and violations of men within the realm of *The Canterbury Tales* seem to be of far less magnitude than that of a woman’s adulterous liaisons, which remain the heart of many plots in Chaucer’s tales.

While the Wife indicates that the forbidden is always desired, she also states that whatever is imposed upon a person will lead to searching for a way out; a notion we also meet with the ‘leashed’ wives of the Merchant and the Miller, where the tales may not so much be strictly about a wife’s adultery, but also about the ingenuity that is borne of confinement, and the creative ways in which one attempts to flee. But despite these woes of marriage that the Wife of Bath elaborately describes, she still relishes the conjugal life, and she clearly states in her prologue that she is awaiting a sixth husband because she doesn’t want to be “too chaste.” In this sense, the wife also reflects the duality of the female character, for she does contradict herself.

She questions patriarchal authority and challenges various stereotypes that suggest women are , in particular, sexually voracious – ironically, while she boasts proudly of “throttling her husbands with her sexuality in order to get what she wants” (Cornelius 70).

The portrayal of duality when it comes to women not only resides within the Wife of Bath. Chaucer has created a portrait of duality in the depiction of female narrators within the frame story of *The Canterbury Tales*. He presents his readers the Wife of Bath, who is mainly concerned with domestic issues; the Prioress, who is concerned with spirituality and religious authority; and the Second Nun, who combines both the domestic and spiritual spheres. The Wife of Bath stands out amongst the three women narrators because she is loud and flamboyant, and open about her sexuality whereas the other two women are very reserved in their speech and general attitudes. The Prioress is regarded in very high esteem by the other pilgrims, who consider her

very feminine by the standards of her age [...] the Wife [is] unfeminine or even an example of female vice. The Prioress is consciously refined, aping the manners of the court. The Wife is “wandrynge by weye and breaking the rules.” In Chaucer’s Europe, different linguistic behavior was prescribed for men and women. Medieval books of advice for women recommended them not to speak much and not to laugh or joke. Women were meant to be quiet. Loquacious women are a favorite target of medieval satire and types of discourse that are considered womanish but not feminine. (Martin 467)

The Wife of Bath definitely stepped outside the lines of her gendered role, which required her to be soft-spoken, careful, and meek. She bears none of these traits, creating a massive void between herself and the other female narrators. The Prioress (alongside the Nun) and the Wife create the perfect example of the extremes when it comes to the medieval portrayal of women – reserved versus ostentatious; pious versus impure; feminine versus vulgar; and traditional versus unconventional by society’s standards. By creating these two opposite poles in the frame tale, Chaucer suggests the duality of female types. Where all three female narrators are concerned, however, Chaucer once again exemplifies his stance of subtle support for women in how he

gives them “the kinds of power or authority that women can attain, and perhaps more significantly, each of the three women narrators attempts in her prologue and tale to create, not merely a single authoritative female figure, but a whole female tradition of authority, in which powerful women are invoked to pass their authority on to other women, including the narrator herself” (Sturges 41). Despite the respectability of the soft-spoken Prioress, it is the Wife of Bath that remains the central female figure in *The Canterbury Tales*. Her general ‘blabber’ defies social constrictions by venturing into the taboos of sexuality, making her an appealing character to readers because she is “a proto-feminist; a woman espousing ideas of female strength and independence long before those qualities were considered by general society as appropriate descriptions of women” (Cornelius 70).

It is indeed very unconventional and perhaps even very modern of the Wife of Bath to be asking such an intensely philosophical question in her tale: “What thing is it that wommen most desyren” (Chaucer 222). On his quest, the knight meets an old woman who promises to help him with the answer on the condition that he grants her any wish she chooses. Because he is a desperate man, he agrees, and returns to the queen with his answer: ““wommen desyren to have sovereyntee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie him above; / This is your moste desyr’ [‘Generally, women desire to have domination / over their husbands as well as their lovers, / and to be above them in mastery; / this is your greatest desire’]” (Chaucer 228). This would be perhaps one of the most important revelations in the Wife of Bath’s tale; had it been wrong, the answer would have cost the knight his life. But as he is allowed to live, then basically this answer is the crux of the entire tale, coupled with the hints the Wife of Bath had been dropping throughout the story, the answer is one that is unlikely to be appealing in a patriarchal society as it openly suggests the ultimate switching of gender roles. Throughout the tales, it is men who have harbored sovereignty over their women and who have leashed them to their sides and who have as a result been cuckolded. A switch in authority that allows for

women to dominate the domestic scene is, however, exactly what has happened in these stories – both wives of the Miller and the Merchant already dominate the domestic scene; first by allowing their husbands to believe that they have their wife tucked safely at the sides, and at the same time, still taking on a lover and balancing out both relationships to keep everyone in the triangle happy.

In domestic realms of *The Arabian Nights*, the two adulterous wives, until their discovery, had had the kingdom's slaves at their beck and call while their kings remained oblivious. The authority in the domestic realm was then switched to Scheherazade, who through her storytelling has leashed Shahrayar's mind. No matter how endangered her life was, she still, with her wit and intellect, had control over her husband, and hence the kingdom which no longer saw further executions of young maidens. Even the Wife of Bath had control over the domestic realm, where her sexuality was the main force behind her being able to "control" her husbands. The knight in her tale is the first victim of this revelation. The old woman from whom he had received help in finding an answer to the queen's question finally calls in the debt and asks to be taken as the young knight's wife. The knight beseeches her; "'For Goddes love, as chees a newe requeste; / Tak al my good, and lat my body go'" ["'For the love of God, ask for something else; / take all my property and let my body go'"] (Chaucer 230), and once again, the tables are turned. As once the maiden he raped had begged his mercy and asked for her body to be spared violation, he now begs for his body to be spared from marriage to an old hag. This act of beseeching is very reminiscent of the counter-rape scene in *The Arabian Nights* with the two kings and the Jinn's captive, where the choice is between copulation against one's will or a certain death. The switched roles of authority are very ironic in both tales; once women were at their mercy, and now it is they who beseech mercy instead.

But just as words are used in *The Arabian Nights* to cure and soften a king that was bent on blood and revenge, so do words soften the heart of the knight in the Wife of Bath's tale. It is only through verbal articulation that the old woman brings the knight to appreciate womanhood in all its aspects, and ironically, it is only through his newfound understanding that his wife suddenly becomes young and beautiful, suggesting indirectly that only when men appreciate women for what they are and let them be, will they find true happiness. In this sense, both king Shahrivar and the knight have that one thing in common. Through listening and understanding the words of their women, their arrogance thaws and an alternative reality sets in, followed by a reward: Shahrivar's perception of an ugly world vanishes and he is rewarded with a faithful wife, and the knight's perception of the old hag changes and he is rewarded with a wife who is now young and beautiful. At the same time, the female protagonists in both tales have affirmed their dominance and power over the domestic and marital realm.

The sexuality of the wife in these two medieval narratives, though explicit, is blunt and colorless in terms of how little the reader is able to grasp the psychology behind her infidelities. Though as readers we understand her anger, deprivation, and her instant succumbing to extramarital seduction, we are still quite often deprived of her *voice* and personal *perspective*. Alternatively with the modern adulteress, we can hear her stream of thoughts, understand her reluctance, shame, or determination when it comes to infidelity, and feel her pain when she progressively finds that her heart lies outside of wedlock – a notion we can only guess when it comes to the medieval narratives. This difference is due to the static, “story-telling” nature of the medieval texts where the stories are short and to the point, where they were initially meant to entertain and pass time without dwelling too much on the psychological or contextual elements of a particular character. The modern adulteress, however, is often a case-study more than a means of entertainment, “a subject, not an object” (Lee 17), where all her psychological, emotional, social, cultural, and religious restrictions – as a result of patriarchal and social expectations – are

laid out for critical examination both by readers and critics. The black-and-white we see of the medieval wives melts into various shades of grey and even an explosion of colors when it comes to wifely adultery in the modern texts.

CHAPTER 3

***Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *A Certain Woman*: Adultery in Search of Fulfillment**

The adulterous wife in the modern texts has morphed. She is no longer a part of the plot to make a story solely entertaining, or to deliver a quick moral message to readers in passing. In Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1929) and El Badry's *A Certain Woman* (2001), the text is initially all about *her*. Though written almost a century apart, D. H. Lawrence and Hala El Badry simultaneously through their characters, Connie and Nahed, confront their readers with intricate thoughts and details in and about the act of sex; and not just the act, but also the implications of its occurrence outside of the matrimonial vows, from a female perspective. In the medieval texts – though they also draw a picture of the general social attitude towards issues of sex and marriage of the day – readers were given something of a fable; a once-upon-a-time scenario that was meant to both amuse and teach, or at least give subtle insight, on the joys and woes of marriage, as well as the various female types that were depicted. This static depiction often dissolves in the modern texts, where ideas about sexuality that were bluntly indicated in the medieval texts are instead elaborated. A new form of nature is explored, a *human* and *sexual* nature that is independent of socially conditioned thought. It is not surprising that both novels caused a stir and brought about a wave of criticism and condemnation. Lawrence and El Badry have questioned some of the traditional stereotypes and presented the psyche of the modern adulteress for an examination of her real character and quest for fulfillment.

Whereas many twentieth-century writers have indeed become more open about sexuality, the naked human body, the intricate details of foreplay, coitus, ejaculation, and orgasm, remain threatened by self-censorship or institutional censorship. Sexuality, when explicitly depicted, becomes what censors describe as “obscene,” rendering the narration of sexuality in its bare and raw form a kind of taboo. It was these very explorations that caused the banning of *Lady*

Chatterley's Lover in several countries over the span of the twentieth century, where it was declared as "obscene literature" and described as "filthy," "smutty," "degrading," and "offensive" (Sova 100-104). In the documents concerning the 1959 trial that called for the official banning of the text¹⁰ (though it was suppressed from the public long before this date) the novel was described as such: "*Lady Chatterley's Lover* presented the forbidden acts in forbidden detail, and described them in forbidden language" (Sova 102). While the act of sex on the grounds of marriage in general society was not really forbidden, the notion of adultery most certainly was. It was the sympathetic light in which Connie is represented by Lawrence that also paved way for such harsh criticism. The constant use of the word "forbidden" during the trial emphasized just how much havoc the notion of open female sexuality could create, and also at the same time, how powerful censorship was in terms of conditioning minds with what they can and cannot read. According to French philosopher, historical and social theorist Michel Foucault, censorship was the means through which society could rein control over depictions of sex in general, by rendering it taboo in literary discourse, where

as if in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present. And even these prohibitions, it seems, were afraid to name it. Without even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex. (Foucault 17)

A novel about an unhappy wife whose husband openly suggests she has an affair, and who does have one that is described in great detail and that eventually gets her impregnated, is not a novel that is bound to go down easily with readers who have been conditioned to negate sex from discourse over decades. In early twentieth-century society that was still dominated by patriarchal authorities, a novel that even suggested female sexual individuality in such an open and explicit manner was dangerous in terms of how it could disrupt the social order and authoritative control over the masses. To avoid a disruption as such, "labels of obscenity or pornography [were] imposed upon all statements which are believed to jeopardize any existing

social order. The relevant charges have been brought against novels such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* because of their sexual content [...] invariably, works of art are judged as immoral or pornographic when they violate the 'natural order'" (Clignet 290-291). What Lawrence does, however, is question this implication of "natural order." His novel abounds in sex scenes, descriptive nudity, and also graphic language; he depicts realistic phenomena, but it is only when these phenomena are in *print* that the reality becomes a crisis and the censors must step into the picture. For Lawrence, his intention was not to harm the social order, but rather bring attention to the underlying natural order of life, where he says "you mustn't think I advocate perpetual sex. Far from it. Nothing nauseates me more than promiscuous sex in and out of season. But I want, with *Lady C.*, to make an *adjustment in consciousness* to the basic physical realities" (qtd. in Beal 23).

Three-quarters of a century later, El Badry also attempts to adjust social consciousness in her controversial novel *A Certain Woman* which "examines one of the great taboos in contemporary Arab culture - adultery" (Asfour 1), and as a result, is criticized by various social and religious authorities. While the novel was "well received by women readers, critics, and reviewers and by a majority of the male audience [...] a vociferous minority of male critics felt scandalized by it, finding it unseemly that such issues should be raised by a woman" (AUC Press 15). According to El Badry, a reference made to sexuality in a literary text is one issue, while references to *female* sexuality by a *female* author is another. In a 2005 lecture which El Badry gave at the University of Chicago, she explained: "an attack on my writing should not be because I am a woman that wrote it. The attack should be about the idea, not *who* portrays the idea" ("My Experience"). In her novel, El Badry describes the inner turmoil of an average Egyptian woman living in a society governed by tradition, routine, and inevitably patriarchy, who lives in denial of her body, her happiness, and her "true self" until she encounters a man who brings out her sexual side in a way her husband could not. El Badry's detailed portrayal of the lovemaking

episodes between Nahed and Omar are lyrical and almost poetic in the metaphoric descriptions of Nahed's satisfaction and feeling of completion and contentment after an intimate scene of lovemaking; and similarly, Omar's constant descriptions of his sated desires through Nahed are just as moving. It is this very beauty in which El Badry chooses to describe an adulterous relationship within conservative Arabic culture that triggers the scandal which her novel has created. In the manner which Lawrence's "obscenities" sparked controversy, El Badry's lyricism has done exactly the same, suggesting that female adultery in any culture or in any manner of writing, whether harsh or gentle, whether by a man or a woman, will *not* be easily accepted by authorities if that writing sympathizes with an adulterous relationship in any way.¹¹

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *A Certain Woman*, the adulterous wives are not punished by invisible forces, nor do they fall into some kind of tragedy, which would have made the story a lot easier for authorities to accept, since "the unfaithful wife is in social terms a self-concealing figure, one from whom society would prefer to withhold recognition so that it would be possible to say that she does not exist. Yet physically and creaturely she manifestly does, so she becomes a paradoxical presence of negativity within the social structure" (Tanner 13). The authors instead chose an alternative form of closure that somehow created a triumph out of the adulteries, where the protagonists leave their husbands, and begin a new life with their lovers. It is an open ending, a hopeful ending, where the adulteress goes unpunished at a social level and the woeful husband that makes his wife unhappy is left behind. Both Lawrence and El Badry, through an ending as such, attempt in their writing to depict a reality of unhappy marriages that lead to adulterous liaisons -- situations which exist, but to which conformist society turns a blind eye.

Writers dealing with sexuality have often been "censored [...], verbally abused, physically attacked, shunned by families and communities, excommunicated from their religious congregations and shot, hanged, or burned at the stake" (Sova xi-x). Much like the adulteress

herself, the writer violates somehow the sacred vows of a restricted social order by stepping outside the lines of the expected norm, just as an adulteress violates marital vows and steps outside an allocated code of womanhood. Medieval texts as early as *The Arabian Nights* and *Canterbury Tales* were all at some point banned by censorship laws despite their lighthearted nature. Likewise, more modern works throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were tried and banned, on account of obscenity because they contained “filthy” material that, according to various authorities such as governments, religious crusaders and moral advocates, could corrupt the society and undermine its foundations. Through his work however, Lawrence has tried to surpass official censors in attempt to reach readers and awaken their “social consciousnesses” to acknowledge the human realities that surround them. Taking on a stance as a social reformer, Lawrence openly protested this artificial means of protection, saying that “culture and civilization have taught us to treat thoughts and actions, deeds and words [as] two separate forms of consciousness and lives [...] I want men and women to be able to think sex fully, completely, honestly and cleanly”(qtd. in Clignet 296). In this sense, Lawrence writes for everyone in his exploration of reality beyond the artifice imposed by a particular authority, where he is a writer who is “concerned with discovering the sexuality that lies beyond or behind discourse – a writer, moreover, who found it necessary to distinguish between *real sex*, *real desire*, and *counterfeit* (socially constructed) desire” (Kellogg 36).

Hala El Badry also goes on a quest beyond the socially acceptable in an attempt to explore the sexuality that is so well disguised in Arab cultures. As a modern day writer, however, El Badry takes it on herself to defy the social constraints that put a limit on her creativity and that at the same time, limit the minds that exist within the society in which censors are meant to protect. Her biggest hurdle, bigger than any censorship laws in Egypt, was the censor within herself;

I imagine at some point in our lives, a person must chose what they really want. And the real battle is with freedom – not just from an external censor, the one that controls our life, our beliefs and our relations. These censors are obvious. The

problem, especially with a writer, is with the *internal* censor. As a writer, my internal censor tells me “don’t touch this” or “don’t go near that.” But I made a conscious decision to *cancel* that censor. And to write what I want, when I want. And I can discuss what may be un-publishable. (“My Experience”)

While her book was never actually banned, it elicited much wrath in conservative circles, as El Badry’s translator, Farouk Abdel Wahab, discussed in his introduction to the lecture El Badry gave in Chicago:

This book received a lot of appreciation from many critics – and was very angrily denounced by other conservative critics. Probably because I believe it gives us an alternative picture, far from the traditional picture of the Arab Woman, different from the discriminated and tortured version of women we are given through the perspective of Nawal el Saadawy. But this is not the reality here. It is about time that a woman wrote about the relations between the two genders with complete honesty (Abdel Wahab).

El Badry understood that she was venturing into a territory that had rarely been touched by an Egyptian female writer. She explained that her novel is subdivided into several chapters that had titles to reflect their topics, “and some of those topics were worrying – they wandered into the areas that are completely taboo; terrains that we all know well of, but don’t dare discuss. And it is this forbidden terrain that I adore writing about. Because it is the terrain that is the most deserving of articulation” (“My Experience”).

Connie and Nahed on Love and Sex: Within and Without the Marital Realm

Both Lawrence and El Badry delve deeply into the terrain of female sexuality, on mental, emotional, and physical levels. Lawrence presents the voice of a woman, and as a male writer, he ingeniously offers a sympathetic portrayal of Connie where only *she* speaks, and he as a writer does not interfere with any male-oriented judgmental vocabulary, such as “cunning” or “wretch” or “whore” which are so prominent in the medieval texts, and that immediately mold a reader’s perception against the female character. Connie’s description is borne of herself, spoken

in a mental flow of information that is her own. Such is also the case in El Badry's narrative, where she writes from the point of view of *both* the male and the female character, expressing varied perspectives on society and depicting Nahed's love story with Omar, including their intimacies and states of mind. El Badry explains that there is often a misconception that female writers write only about the female perspective of life. "My characters in *A Certain Woman*," she says, "that spoke about, expressed and experienced love were both men and women from within a community. As a writer, I was both man and woman. In some schools of criticism, they say only female writers can portray a female perspective of the world. But I do not agree – I do not see a major difference between what is written, either in style or subject, by a man or a woman, anywhere in the world" ("My Experience"). The same may possibly be the case for Lawrence, where despite his being a male writer, his depiction of Connie's thoughts coincide with Nahed's in a way that is strikingly similar, suggesting also that a male writer can only write from a male oriented perspective of the world is not necessarily true. It further suggests that much like Chaucer, Lawrence was indeed sympathetic to women in the plights of loveless marriages and adultery, and hence did not condemn his protagonist to a terrible fate.

Connie and Nahed are both women trapped in loveless marriages, where their husbands become increasingly insensitive. As a result, they inevitably bounce across love with another man. Despite the different genders of the authors, as well as the cultural difference of the contexts in which they were written, both novels vividly portray their protagonists compassionately, prompting what could be interpreted as a justification of adultery. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Connie's sexless relationship with her crippled husband Clifford functions purely at a mental level which, though intellectually stimulating, falls into physical and emotional dormancy, becoming both detached and lifeless in her solitude. She examines her naked body in the mirror and discovers that she is losing weight and wilting in the same way her life is: "Her body was going meaningless, going dull and opaque, so much insignificant substance. It made her feel

immensely depressed and hopeless. What hope was there? She was old, old at twenty-seven, with no gleam and sparkle in the flesh. Old through neglect and denial, yes, denial [...] that mental life! Suddenly she hated it with a rushing fury” (Lawrence 59). The question of age bounces back and forth between Connie and Nahed, where Nahed also says, “I haven’t yet reached forty but I had prematurely aged despite the fact that whoever saw me laugh believed the deception” (*A Certain Woman* 104). In their sensual and emotional depravity, their bodies seem to age. In the whirlwinds of passion however, they blossom. Clifford acknowledges Connie’s radiance after she returns home one evening from Mellors’ hut; “He admired her. He could not help admiring her. She looked so flushed and handsome and smooth; love smooth [...] that evening, Clifford wanted to be nice to her” (Lawrence 205). Omar also describes Nahed after several years of their affair; “I hadn’t seen Nahed so beautiful before. She’s become curvaceous, put on some weight, as if turning from a virgin to a fully-developed woman and her face was glowing. Is it possible that a woman reaches the zenith of her beauty in her forties? [...] the gleam in her eyes, the curves of her lusty body aroused me greatly” (*A Certain Woman* 110).

Connie immediately worships Mellors’ body when she sees him bathing, and through the course of her thoughts, it becomes evident that Connie cannot survive on intellect alone, nor ignore her carnal needs in light of her sensual nature. She weakens whenever Mellors looked “straight into [her] eyes with a perfect, fearless, impersonal look, as if he wanted to know what she was like” (Lawrence 38). In contrast, the cold, businesslike Clifford had never done so, where “what she was like” was as neglected by Clifford as was her body: “the front of her body made her miserable. It was already beginning to slacken, with a slack sort of thinness, almost withered, going old before it had ever really lived” (Lawrence 59). She makes extensive references to her breasts that are drooped and hanging, signifying that her effeminate features have wilted with lack of use, making brief referrals to the youthful flounce of her figure in the past. She

acknowledges that only her backside remains somewhat intact, suggesting that not all hope is lost, and also foretelling of her affair with Mellors who, through sex and then also impregnation, will fill out her body and return her physique to its former healthful glory. It is only after she meets him, after he looks right through her, that Connie summons the courage to strip in front of the mirror and examine herself and her body, and inevitably her life with Clifford. At Wragby, only her mind is alive, where she entertains Clifford's rather snobbish guests and has to endure their shallow chit-chat, as well as stay on track with Clifford's new career in writing. Those close to her notice her physical drainage since her marriage to Clifford; her father calls her a 'half-virgin' (Lawrence 13). Her sister is appalled at her lack of luster and thinning, pale body; her guest, Lady Bennerly, openly advises her to find a solution to her state and fast:

"Look at the way you are shut up here. I said to Clifford: If that child rebels one day you'll have yourself to thank! [...] A woman has to live her life, or live to repent not having lived it. Believe me!"

"But I do live my life, don't I?"

"Not in my idea! Clifford should bring you to London, and let you go about. His sort of friends are all right for him, but what are they for you? If I were you I should think it wasn't good enough. You'll let your youth slip by, and you'll spend your old age, and your middle age too, repenting it." (Lawrence 61)

For Nahed, her deprivation in marriage is almost the opposite of Connie's; it was the *lack* of intellectual and emotional stimulation that drove Nahed to the arms of her lover Omar, discovering the alternative side of her sexuality that was absent in her marriage to Mustafa. Nahed finds a side of her that goes beyond her gendered role in a culture that primes women from childhood to become wives and mothers, and that at the same time strictly prohibits female pre- and extra-marital relationships. Like Connie, Nahed discovers after meeting Omar that she plays an artificial and superficial role propagated by her obligation to social propriety, which drives her both mentally and emotionally further away from Mustafa, becoming increasingly insensitive. Over the span of almost a century, the description of husbandly insensitivity particularly in the sexual realm is disturbingly similar, where both Lawrence and El Badry raise a very important question of female satisfaction in the conjugal sphere.

El Badry's novel in particular sparked controversy amongst Egyptian men and women because she brought forth questions that many young wives seemed too afraid to ask of their own accord; "Young women's reactions to my novel especially here in Egypt were incredible" El Badry says. "They encouraged me to continue writing on these issues. Very often when I am invited to speak about my book, I am asked why men become so negative after they marry and why husbands care so little about their wives' feelings" (qtd. in Kaaki 1). She suggests that her novel has done exactly what censors were afraid of. It reveals the reality in which they live, a reality in which people do not dare to question a misogynistic society that discourages straying from the norm, so they choose duplicity to counter its repression.

Connie reflects on sex, prior to her liaison with Mellors, saying that "however one might sentimentalize it, this sex business was one of the most ancient, sordid connections and subjections. Poets who glorified it were mostly men [...] They insisted on the sex thing like dogs [and] a woman had to yield. A man was like a child with his appetites. A woman had to yield him what he wanted, or like a child he would probably turn nasty and flounce away and spoil what was a very pleasant connection" (Lawrence 3). For Nahed, the situation does not differ much, where she tells Mustafa; "I had been just a refuse-can the whole time. A hole. A mere hole [...]. Each time, you promise to be with me and then forget me the moment you enter me [...] You've enjoyed my waiting for your mercy" (*A Certain Woman* 105).

Both Lawrence and El Badry choose to defy Freud's rather patriarchal theory of active-passive sexuality, penis envy and inferiority in the realms of gender, at the moment their characters defy society's stereotyped and misogynistic views of adulterous women. In the course of these two novels, Freud's theory of passivity and lack of the female is subverted. Both Connie and Nahed attest to how they take matters into their own hands during intercourse by controlling their responses. Nahed explains to her readers an episode with her husband:

I taught myself not to feel his hands as they felt my face, to ignore them as they moved in to my breasts or slid over my bellybutton. I taught my nerves to withstand sensual onslaughts and I threw the flowers of lust into the well there to die with all the feelings I had already drowned there. I trained my orgasms to channel their responses to things other than what excited them. (*A Certain Woman* 158)

This suggests that she is not passive, but defiant in her sexuality and selective. Similarly, Connie suggests:

A woman could take a man without really giving herself away. Certainly she could take him without giving herself into his power. Rather, she could use the sex thing to have power over him. For she only had to hold herself back in sexual intercourse, and let him finish and expend himself without herself coming to the crisis: and then she could prolong the connection and achieve her orgasm and her crisis while he was merely her tool. (Lawrence 3)

This passage exemplifies how she can use *his use* of her body to enjoy himself sexually without necessarily losing her pleasure. Connie in particular is anything but passive in her sexuality, where her eroticism

best underlines Lawrence's attitude towards female sexuality [...] she allows herself to *adore* the male body [...] it was a breakthrough – to give women the possibility of adoring man. Time and time again male novelists, including Lawrence, have written about man smitten by the sight of female breasts, flesh, hair and, though not often in this day, lower regions, but how often had woman – who by Victorian standards was not supposed to enjoy sex – been able to admit her own predilections? (Dix 88)

Connie goes into extensive descriptions of Mellors' body in it's "perfect, white, solitary nudity" with "contours that one might touch" (Lawrence 55-56), foretelling of how her passive sexual dormancy at Wagby will be replaced by an extremely active sexual appetite when she becomes involved with Mellors; Connie becomes "the active one; she is the participant, lover, doer, and of the two, the one with the most expressed feelings" (Dix 90).

Nahed's sexual relationship with her husband Mustafa may very well have been achieved through the Freudian model, for sexual ingenuity outside of the traditional 'mercenary position'

is not something Mustafa could really do. But when one day Nahed assumes a different position during their intercourse (where he is below, and she is above), Mustafa immediately becomes impotent (*A Certain Woman* 93). Connie on the other hand passively allows Mellors to penetrate her with no resistance or even participation during their first union, where she describes it as a kind of dream-state (Lawrence 99-100). Her lovemaking with him from then on usually combines either active or passive copulation, but what is evident is that Lawrence portrays how they try various positions – amongst them is standing up, signifying that her role is neither passive nor active, but simply equal. What is evident however, is that when sex *and* emotion are combined, there emerges enough trust between the two to allow a woman to lower her defenses, giving *in* to the passive role which Freud describes is their nature; in the arms of Mellors, “[Connie’s] old instinct was to fight for her freedom. But something else in her was strange and inert and heavy. His body was urgent against her, and she hadn’t the heart anymore to fight” (Lawrence 115). On the other hand, Nahed tells Omar “I love my weaknesses with you because it makes me feel human and because it makes me feel like a woman” (*A Certain Woman* 119). In terms of Foucault, to “give in” need not necessarily imply weakness, where “we must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power. On the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality [...] the rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be the sex-desire, but bodies and pleasure” (Foucault 157).

The Body: Nakedness, Desire, Sex, and Taboo

Sex-manuals such as the ancient *Kama Sutra*, *Ars Amatoria*, and *The Perfumed Garden* offered both explicit visuals and narratives on the *art* of sex, and provided invaluable advice to men on how to be great lovers, even within the sphere of marriage, emphasizing particularly on *how* to celebrate women’s sexuality. The importance of sex as a physical necessity was acknowledged

even by the law, and in the time of Chaucer, Church laws “put enormous emphasis upon deterrent – namely, a requirement that all spouses render the sexual debt, lest they be responsible for their partner’s misdeeds” (Jacobs 338-339). But what *is* the sexual debt? Sex as an essential part of human nature and procreation was rendered moral under the social construction of marriage, but immoral outside of it, and hence, keeping up the glory of the act was essential to the survival of the marriage and to keep within the lines of morality. There seems to be a misconception however, that marital bliss coincides only with the male half of the relationship – a notion that proportionally grew in what Foucault believes is a byproduct of the censorship of narratives that spoke of sex, which began in the seventeenth century, and which also suggests that along with the censorship of text, so did censorship exist beyond the text and into the very foundations of society:

[it] was the beginning of an age of repression emblematic of what we call the bourgeois societies, an age which perhaps we still have not completely left behind. Calling sex by its name thereafter became more difficult and more costly... even without having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one did not speak of sex. (Foucault 17)

Through Connie and Nahed, the insecurities and taboos of female sexuality are exposed, and prompt the very important question that arose in the medieval narratives: Are women adulterous by nature? Are they inevitably reflected in the realm of the medieval stereotypes that render women cunning and unfaithful, or would their infidelities be the result of the need to discover and embrace an identity separate from the gendered roles of ‘wives’ and ‘mothers’ in a lifeless marriage that has confined them? The Wife of Bath had said “forbede us thing, and that desyren we; / Prees on us faste, and thanne wol we flee” (Chaucer 204), suggesting that adultery is a psychological, more than a biological, phenomenon. Evidently, the trigger for female adultery is usually in a woman’s dissatisfaction within the marriage – “The man doesn’t necessarily have to be bad for the marriage to fail. Isn’t the lack of fulfillment enough?” (*A Certain Woman* 192). In *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and *A Certain Woman*, we have the *actual* wife’s perspective on the

matters of sexuality— her thoughts about sex, her unhappiness, her fantasies, and also her doubts. As opposed to the wife in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* whom we are told has "She obeyeth, be hire lief or looth" (Chaucer 274), we have Connie's open distaste for her husband, "sexually... passionless, even dead" (Lawrence 42), and Nahed's guilty repulsion at her husband's sexual advances, "how could I stand anything related to Mustafa? How did his body odor turn into something that greatly bothered me and his touching me feel like hell?" (*A Certain Woman* 127-128).

Description of *adulterous* sex in both novels is open, detailed, portrayed explicitly and with complete abandon, often going on for long paragraphs that render the sexual encounters as ultimately phenomenal. Connie and Nahed have one thing in common when it comes to their sexual encounters with their lovers; they both refer to it as a kind of *liberation*, an awakening of some kind that tears them out of their mundane existence as wives and women in a society controlled by decorum which they must respect. Connie expects that through her encounters with Mellors, she

would have died of shame. Instead of which, the shame died. Shame, which is fear: the deep organic shame, the old, old physical fear which crouches in the bodily roots of us, and can only be chased away by the sensual fire, at least it was roused up and routed by the phallic hunt of the man and she came to the very heart of the jungle of herself. She felt, now, she had come to the real sensual self, named and unashamed. She felt a triumph, almost a vainglory. So! That was how it was! That was life! That was how oneself really was! There was nothing left to disguise or be ashamed of. She shared her ultimate nakedness with a man, another being. (Lawrence 219)

Foucault argued that there is a distinction between sex and sexuality – while one was carnal, the other one was spiritual, sensual, and *sexual*. The carnal element was a reality from which censors could not escape, for reasons such as procreation; but it was minimized, hushed. The *sexuality* side of sex was the danger, in how it is laced with desire, emotion, and affection, and it was this side that was suppressed as much as possible by patriarchal laws of order. In the

biological realms that Freud suggests render women emotionally unstable because of complexes such as penis-envy, women were always more prone to sexuality in the way Foucault employs it in comparison to just sex – and in the case of Connie and Nahed, they discovered themselves capable of *both* these elements in their extramarital relationships. In Foucault's reality, the oppression of sexuality only entices the craving for both sex and sexuality whereas sex can detach itself from sexuality, the opposite is merely impossible; "the deployment of sexuality established one of the most essential internal operating systems; the desire for sex – the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth" (Foucault 156). Through extramarital sex, Connie and Nahed desire to find out more about themselves beyond what they already know; in Foucault's words, they desire to have themselves, access themselves, discover themselves, liberate themselves, articulate themselves and inevitably, find the truth about themselves, beyond oppression. Connie and Nahed both found that truth in a state of undress.

Nakedness is an important aspect in both novels, as if through undressing, the concept of censorship at a very internal, personal level is negated. Connie only begins to revolt against her husband Clifford, his friends, and her life at Wragby in the moment that she undresses in her room at the beginning of the novel. This suggests that to strip oneself of clothes is to also strip oneself of disguise, and that it is only in bare nakedness that one can really look at oneself and acknowledge who and what one is. Connie sees Mellors bathing – solitary, lonely, and what she believes as beautiful – as opposed to when she is confronted with his rudeness and distaste for her when she meets him while he is dressed. When she spends a night with him in the cottage, Connie elaborately touches and describes Mellors' penis as if discovering a creature she has never understood. In creating Connie, Lawrence attempts to create an appreciation for the male figure, raising it to the same levels of artistic and erotic appreciation that has timelessly flanked the female naked body, and hence through his writing he attempts to create a kind of equality

between the two genders, raising them up to the same level of physical beauty. Through something as simple as a woman's appreciation of a man's bare body – which in itself is a taboo – Lawrence “does not imprison [women] in passivity, but frees them to an equal appreciation of the male nude form, such as had long been enjoyed by men of women, in both art and life” (Dix 88). In *A Certain Woman*, Nahed also discovers in nakedness her misconceptions and also liberation. In a letter to Omar she writes,

Nakedness is what used to frighten me about love; it is what prevented me from getting involved in a story in which I would be wounded, because I realized quite consciously that I could not achieve total union with an other except naked, nerves and the inside exposed, with open memory, willing to concede my old restraints so that each of us would flow into and meld with the other. (*A Certain Woman* 184).

Her description hence summarizes her dilemma with Mustafa – even as he tries to reconcile their relationship through sex, the contact is not with her bare body:

One night I woke up to his body trying to penetrate my clothes. Before I completely come to, he ejaculated that desire that had been repressed for months, before reaching the place where, for long years, he discharged his solo pleasure. (*A Certain Woman* 130)

According to her words, she had never reached a satisfying sexual union with Mustafa because he did not savor her nudity. In their marriage, she was still somehow concealed from him, suggesting that nakedness was not only a state of physical undress, but also a willingness to show what nakedness resides beyond bare skin.

Both women seem to better understand who they are in this whirlwind of passion and nakedness, and find it ultimately difficult to resort back to their former lives of concealed sexual potential and the artifice of their gendered roles, where they discover that in adjusting themselves to fit into a specific code of womanhood – one of strictly attending the needs of a husband and home. They seem to have lost a particular aspect of that very womanhood which it seems they are only able to regain in their extramarital relations, namely, their sexual identity which according to

Freud, is in the biological makeup of a woman's very being, just as it is in a man's. After every encounter with their lovers, Connie and Nahed seem to be plagued by a kind of disorientation. It is the result of their now double-lives – on one hand a home, a husband, and in Nahed's case children as well, and on the other hand a manifested fantasy of affection, sensitivity, *and* an appeased sexuality that poses as an alternative to their reality. Between the two lives, between what they desire and what they already have, their identities begin to fuzz, and inevitably the two women are faced with similar questions. Connie wonders, "What was the good of it all? What was the good of her sacrifice, her devoting her life to Clifford?" (Lawrence 60). Similarly, Nahed asks, "What have I accomplished and what do I want?" (*A Certain Woman* 104). These are questions that suggest a sort of mid-life crisis, where inevitably both women have begun to question the legitimacy of their lives and happiness, where despite their affections for their husbands they cannot seem to help their growing resentment. Nahed eventually visits a psychiatrist, to whom she explains;

I suffer from a double life: I cannot separate from my husband and I can't do without the man I love and am committed to [...]. Whenever I think of a decision that would guide the boat of my life to his safe haven, I fear for my two children and the stability I have in my life now, even though it is a cold stability that gives me nothing, but rather pushes me to find someone else [...]. I am torn between two worlds and I can't choose. (*A Certain Woman* 191).

Nahed's words suggest that it is not only a matter of her having met Omar that makes her want to leave Mustafa, where had he not appeared in her life she would have been "pushed to find someone else." Her adultery hence is a matter of *choice*, rather than chance, and an attempt to find the fulfillment that she has lost in her loveless marriage. She continues to say: "I fear for his feelings, that I don't hate him but that he does not fulfill me in any way" (*A Certain Woman* 192).

Nahed, a product of traditional Egyptian culture that advocates how a woman belongs only "where her husband is" (*A Certain Woman* 38), is suddenly awakened. Her earlier confusion

about what she really wanted from life seems to be the natural emotional evolution in light of this awakening. Despite her turmoil between the social concepts of right and wrong and her own intuition, Nahed's discovery of a lost side of her womanhood brings back a part of her character that was obliterated in her conjugal life. Her self-expression and fulfillment were strangled, and she realizes that in staying faithful to her role as mother and wife, she has neglected herself: "How cruel I was to myself and my needs!" (*A Certain Woman* 119) she says, when she realizes her life has been pinned into the cork of conformity and imposed social order. Through Nahed, El Badry

makes it clear that women's professional and intellectual dreams die in the prison of "closed rooms" in which "words come back without connecting." Nahid's life is seen as wasted in waiting for her husband and in preparing dinner for his colleagues. For Nahid, her married life is a total disappointment, but she struggles to break the silence and to admit that society sickened her. (Al-Ghafari)

Her first step in revolting against society is admitting that it has her leashed. She resents that Omar would be able to extract himself from his own marriage with ease if he chose to: "If society permits divorce for me so it can be official and does not recognize separation alone as an entitlement to see another man, the situation is not as complex for you, at least it makes possible for you to take another wife" (*A Certain Woman* 209). Her crisis, as opposed to Connie's, is a contextual one. Nahed belongs to a conservative culture, where women are often victims to misogyny, assimilated and defined by women themselves.. Efforts made by women

to deconstruct the sexual misogyny is usually met with traditional views from women themselves who give legitimacy to sexual inequality. Consequently, some of the views reflected by the female characters assert the common dogma that it is *women* who betray women when they start affairs with married men. (Al-Ghafari)

Along the course of the novel, El Badry "accurately depicts the various conditions of romantic love, including the submission of her characters to illicit desires and the painful consequences that follow" (Anderson 37). Nahed discovers two affairs that emotionally move her: her husband's affair with their neighbor and Omar's affair with a Moroccan woman. Mustafa's affair "reinforc[es] themes of betrayal, doubt, and insecurity that permeate the novel" (Anderson

37), where because it took place before her liaison with Omar, Nahed's pain at the discovery was unspeakable. Mustafa had cracked the solid foundation that was Nahed's life, which was cold and emotionless, but solid nonetheless. It was not until she met Omar that Nahed acknowledged the difference between mere sex and actual love. Omar becomes the man she loves, while Mustafa and the years where she was his bed-partner was simply sex. Omar's affair with the Moroccan woman, however, did not shake Nahed as much as Mustafa's disloyalty initially had. Omar explained his "biological needs" in her absence, and how they were not related to his emotional needs, since it was Nahed he loved. After her sexual encounters with Omar throughout the novel Nahed would immediately ask "do you love me?" – reassured only when he would give her a "yes" and then elaborate on how much. For Nahed, his confessions of love kept her at peace even when she knew he had, and may still be having, an affair. Strangely, each of the characters depicted by El Badry "enjoy sex outside marriage, but they insist on marriage as a social appearance. Lost in a maze, each character experiences fluctuations of love, hate, desire to end up becoming more alienated from their inner selves and the others" (Al-Ghafari).

Connie, in contrast to Nahed, is given a kind of leeway in her adultery. Clifford literally offers that she pursue an extramarital affair, and if she wants, can also have a baby. Initially, the offer came as a shock to Connie who thought that his "logic might be unanswerable because it was so absolutely wrong" (Lawrence 36). Connie also seemed to believe that Clifford's offer was made with her best interests in mind, since he could neither sleep with her nor give her a child. And yet Clifford's casual referrals to his wife sleeping with another man are somewhat crude and insensitive:

That's the real secret of marriage, not sex, at least not the simple function of sex. You and I are interwoven in a marriage. If we stuck to that we ought to be able to arrange this sex thing, as we arrange going to the dentist. (Lawrence 36)

Connie particularly takes offense when Clifford's words become for the most part condescending, where he implies that she is somewhat a sex-maniac:

If lack of sex is going to disintegrate you, then go out and have a love affair. If lack of a child is going to disintegrate you, then have a child if you possibly can. But only do these things so that you can have an integrated life, that makes a long harmonious thing. (Lawrence 37)

He also makes references to Connie's other amorous affairs, particularly with her "German boy." Lawrence is very "explicit about Connie's former sex life, [where] he knew what modern women were like. He knew they liked sex and arranged their own orgasms. This side of women is the one he draws on" (Dix 90). Indeed, Connie's relationship with sex is no secret, as early as chapter two in the novel, readers understand that she had an affair earlier where, contrary to Freudian theories of female passivity, she was in command during the act, and the notion of her "controlling her orgasms" is elaborated. She recalls even how her lover complains: "you couldn't go off at the same time as a man, could you? You'd have to bring yourself off! You'd have to run the show!" (Lawrence 45). Connie's lover's angry complaint, and her husband's cold-hearted and even shameful suggestion, aroused a bitterness in Connie that

burned a cold indignation against Clifford [...] against all the men of his sort who defrauded a woman even of her own body. Unjust! Unjust! The sense of deep physical injustice burned to her very soul. (Lawrence 59)

Sexual and emotional dissatisfaction in her marriage is what prompts Connie to cling to Mellors's ability to sate her sexuality when she finds him. In her search for this missing aspect of her womanhood, she also, inevitably, searches for *manhood*; "at the bottom of her soul, fundamentally, she had needed this phallic hunting out, she had secretly wanted it, and she had believed that she would never get it" (Lawrence 219). Sexually, Connie can take care of herself, but she yearns for what she calls a "real man" to satisfy her:

what a pity most men are so doggy, a bit shameful [...] sensually a bit doggy and humiliating [...] how rare a thing a man is! They are all dogs that trot and sniff and copulate. To have found a man who is not afraid and not ashamed! (Lawrence 219)

Connie hence comes across as emotionally deprived and sexually unfulfilled, particularly when she starts to allude to the Greeks and their immortalization of sex and sensuality. In her night of passion with Mellors, she understands that the concept of manhood is just as elusive as womanhood, and that both are only found through complete and utter sexual abandon.

On Duality

In each of these novels, there is a prevalence of duality. The difference between their innate personalities and their daily lives as wives leads both Connie and Nahed to living double lives. There is a constant internal conflict between what is *expected* of them at a level of social acceptability, and what they each discover they *need* at a very personal level that always clashes with social decorum. The duality is personified in the choice between two men: Clifford and Mellors in terms of Connie, and Mustafa and Omar in terms of Nahed. These men also exemplify the dual forms of reality for each of these women – a life that is stable, but devoid of emotion, as opposed to a life that is full of emotion, but turbulent. As a result of conflict between one form of reality and another, there arises the psychological duality: the Freudian struggle between the *Id* and the *superego*, which, when coincided with Foucault's theories on censorship, suggests that the *Id* and the *superego* are not only elements of basic human psychology, but rather are tethered within the very foundations of society itself. Hence, the dual nature of social existence in the realms of patriarchal conformity, where "Freud sees a censorship that needs to be overcome, Foucault sees an absence of successful censorship; where Freud sees an essentialized sexuality, Foucault sees a historicized sexuality" (Leckie 3).

Even the sexual act has a dual nature in both these novels: it is either of physical necessity or emotional necessity, procreative at a literal level where there is childbirth, or, as the case is with both Nahed and Connie, procreative at a metaphorical level. Metaphorically, it reflects a kind of

re-birth, one that sheds light on a side of their personas that has suffocated within conjugality. It is a side that goes beyond merely the physical need for coitus, and is, rather, the acknowledgment of her existence as a sexual and emotional being and not merely a wife chained to her duties. The duality goes around in circles, suggesting a kind of repetition in terms of these constant conflicts between morally correct or incorrect, between expectations and needs, and more importantly, between patriarchy and female liberation. It is this very conflict that El Badry tried to exemplify through the varied voices in the chapters and the snippet-structure of her book, and which she, as the writer, experienced at a very personal level. She says:

I wrote about it with complete abandon. And when I thought to publish it, I did not even consider censoring or changing any of the text. It was only when it was in print, and I held it in my hand, that I discovered the magnitude of what I had done, having ignored all the censors and also myself, I discovered the areas of the taboo that I had treaded on. I wrote from a human perspective – not necessarily from a female or male perspective. (“My Experience”)

The chapters of *A Certain Woman* are short, sometimes lucid, sometimes flighty, sometime written in short sentences or in extended lyric prose, and more importantly, written from the perspective of both genders. They carry voices of Nahed’s panic and confusion, Omar’s arousal, Mustafa’s suspicion, and Maggie’s obsessiveness. Lawrence, in accordance to Freud, believed

that the human heart must remain in conflict, a conflict between nature and culture or between competing instincts. There is no return to a wordless, undifferentiated state in the Edenic womb. And the stoical Freud believed with the romantic Lawrence [...] in the ongoing joy of expression, at once physical and verbal. The marvelous plasticity of Lawrence's language and the brilliant treatises on dreams, jokes, and mistakes [...] take us beyond a tragic vision. They show us that, in the endless play of the mind, the physical and verbal aspects of consciousness, though never identical, cannot be separated. (Gordon 374)

Inner conflict hence, is inevitable, in light of this permanent fixture of duality, and therefore will manifest itself sexually, psychologically, socially, and artistically in all forms of expression .

At a level closer to the structure of their fictions, Lawrence and El Badry create the *alternative* woman in their plots, sparking the notion of duality once again – a notion that was very common

in the medieval portrayals of women, where there had to be another female in the plot to either tarnish or enhance the portrayal of the protagonist. In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade and the adulterous queens pose as opposites; in the *Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath and the Prioress pose as opposites in a similar fashion – in terms of personality and function, where one was indefinitely considered evil, and the other quite saintly. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Connie's opposite is Mellor's wife Bertha, whom he describes with bitterness;

she sort of kept her will ready against me, always, always: her ghastly female will: her freedom! A woman's ghastly freedom that ends in the most beastly bullying! Oh she always kept her freedom against me, like vitriol in my face [...] She loved me in moments. But she always took it back, and started bullying. Her deepest desire was to bully me,, and there was no altering her. Her *will* was wrong, from the first [...]. I began to love her. But somehow, she always ripped me up. (Lawrence 247-248)

Clifford had described Bertha as a woman who unfavorably 'went off with several men' and hence her separation from Mellors. Clifford's words bring out the duality (and hypocrisy) in his character where while he openly and casually suggests that Connie should engage in an affair, he understands at a very basic level that adultery will lead to separation as it has done with Mellors. This general disapproval of Bertha amongst both men reflect their attitude towards women who wield power. Bertha is portrayed as a woman who abused her power and "bullied" Mellors both sexually and psychologically, leading him to sexual abstinence until Connie comes along. Mellors' obvious anger at "a woman's ghastly freedom" suggest that he is not entirely a supporter of female sexual freedom, particularly if it is used against him. He, and inevitably his author, have reservations about the empowerment of women that can, like all power, turn abusive, which is the case here. And yet much like the queens of *The Arabian Nights*, we do not really get to know her at a personal level. Readers don't exactly like her, because we understand that she is a "bully." But we are nonetheless oblivious to that which had prompted her adulteries, particularly since we see Mellors only through the eyes of Connie and not Bertha. We see, also, Mellors' emotional conflict very much in the same manner in which we see Connie's.

Mellors is torn because while Connie arouses him, he also fears he will be hurt again;

he did not want to come into contact with a woman again. He feared it; for he had a big wound from old contacts. He felt if he could not be alone, and if he could not be left alone, he would die. His recoil away from the outer world was complete; his last refuge was this wood; to hide himself there! (Lawrence 75)

While Connie's inner conflict revolved around her physical and emotion needs as opposed to her sense of duty towards Clifford, Mellors similarly is conflicted between his oath of abstinence as a defense mechanism, and the arousal which Connie inspires. This yes-versus-no conflict resolves for Mellors at the very end of the novel where in his acknowledgment that Connie is nothing like Bertha, he also acknowledges – in the same manner as Shahrayar's – that not all women are alike. That female empowerment in the sexual realm need not mean she must be a "bully," but rather, she can create a sexual equality akin to harmony where she can exist as his "mate," rather than as a sex-object. Mellors

realized as he went into her that this was the thing he had to do. To come into tender touch, without losing his pride or his dignity or his integrity as a man. "I stand for the touch of bodily awareness between human beings," he said to himself, "and the touch of tenderness. And she is my mate [...] Thank God I've got a woman! Thank God I've got a woman who is with me, and tender and aware of me. Thank God she's not a bully, or a fool. Thank God she's a tender, aware woman." (Lawrence 247)

Through this fascinating final description of her, Mellors emphasizes the duality of female types, just as his acknowledgement of her as a sexual equal emphasizes the variety of male types also. Inevitably, his descriptions of their copulation have converted from "fucking" to "a stream of tenderness," suggesting once again the dual nature of the act of sex and how it is a "creative act that is far more than procreative" (Lawrence 247).

In El Badry's novel, a similar Bertha also exists in Omar's wife Maggie. El Badry also brings forth male insecurities regarding the empowerment of women, reflecting their discomfort where

much like Mellors, Omar was skeptical and even resentful of Maggie's powerful personality that manifested itself in the sexual realm:

I didn't connect to her rigid ideas about women's liberation and equality, and removing feelings altogether from the issue and her precise separation of our finances and her ability to use sex to pressure and extort me. (*A Certain Woman* 139).

Maggie's sexual and emotional abuse of Omar creates a counteractive picture of women in the novel where, in comparison to Nahed's urgent but gentle sexuality, Maggie poses as the evil, possessive type that is bunched along the same lines as Bertha. Omar describes her resentment:

Maggie has used my burning desire for her to pressure me. She used it as skillfully as the most lowborn women in Cairo's poor neighborhoods. She considered our mutual relationship one of her weapons in her battles with me [...] She played the game very skillfully: she'd lure me and when I got ready, she'd broach a thorny topic and demand immediate answers. Before I understood this game plan I'd ask her to postpone the discussion a little and continue to swallow the bait and lower my defenses. I would try to seduce her but I would find her more alert, a sharp and already mind moving towards me, taking me out of my amorous mood. (*A Certain Woman* 138-139)

Much like Lawrence, El Badry seems to share the same reservations about female sexual abuse, where she "abides by the view that the sexual domination of women is the heart of sexual inequality" (Al-Ghafari). In her descriptions of sex from the perspective of both genders, as well as the variety amongst the actual genders, she attempts to create a kind of equality from the dual perspective she offers. Through their intertwining representations of women – and inevitably of men – in the sexual sphere, both Lawrence and El Badry have portrayed the static dualities of psycho-sexual existence, but also have attempted to bridge those gaps by abstaining from tradition and by openly discussing how, through sex and sexuality, as Lawrence described it, the "creative act that is far more than procreative" (Lawrence 247).

There is a rising sense of struggle within both Connie and Nahed as they become immersed deeper into their matrimonial lives. Nahed says: "I have my hands full already with that which is stealing me away from myself" (*A Certain Woman* 10). Through her words, Nahed, suggests the

crux of the modern wife's woe, where in the monotony of a loveless marriage, she is "faced with inner stirrings urging [her] to live it up a little, a little bit of craziness brings an unbearable life some renewal, makes it bearable at least" (*A Certain Woman* 22). Similarly, Connie defines these inner stirrings: "The physical sense of injustice is a dangerous feeling, once it is awakened. It must have outlet, or it eats away the one in whom it is aroused" (Lawrence 60). For the modern wife in both these texts, their words sum up the modern woman's internal struggle – the struggle of a subordinated wife (and mother, in Nahed's case) whose character has been restrained and conditioned for centuries under patriarchal domination. Their adulteries are prompted in their search for fulfillment, ecstasy, individuality, liberation, equality, and more importantly, *identity* – not in the shadow of a man, and not just in a sexual sense, but in complete effeminate sense, where her needs – emotional physical, mental – are all met and the existence of her sensual and sexual side acknowledged. Connie hence sums up the needs of the modern woman: "A woman wants you to like her and talk to her, and at the same time love her and desire her" (Lawrence 46). For both Connie and Nahed, what they could not find within wedlock, they sought and found elsewhere.

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

He knew little of how cunning we women are.

– The Captive Woman, *The Arabian Nights*

Forbede us thing, and that desyren we; / Prees on us fase, and than wol we flee

– The Wife of Bath, *The Canterbury Tales*

This study aimed at examining the adulteress in four specific medieval and modern cases, exploring the ways in which female infidelity is portrayed and understood. What endures is the patriarchal element that has often rendered women in these texts as subordinate, and depicts them as prone to marital treachery and adultery. As a result of control over female sexuality, conformity, and social and cultural protocols, female protagonists in the four narratives studied in this thesis have often found themselves trapped within gendered roles as wives, mothers, and daughters. These roles have often negated parts of their personality or constrained their freedom, namely, the side associated with love, sex, and sexuality.

Both *The Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales* are written in the form of tales designed to both pass time and deliver a moral message, however ambiguously. A closer reading of these texts suggests that women have often been kept on a leash in fear of their wayward ways, where the general idea was they would immediately render their husbands cuckolds if left alone for a moment. Yet via the few words spoken by women in these texts, it is evident that women are portrayed as curious, cunning creatures, their intelligence not to be underestimated. In the quotes by the Captive Woman and the Wife of Bath, they both make a long story short, giving the crux of the general take on women in the Middle Ages, without too much talk or hint as to what may

have prompted declarations as such. At the same time, the authors of these texts have branded women with a particular trait – cunning, drawn to the forbidden, and hence prompting the patriarchal perception that they must be restricted at all times.

The physical sense of injustice is a dangerous feeling, once it is awakened. It must have outlet, or it eats away the one in whom it is aroused.

– Connie, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

I have faced inner stirrings urging me to live it up a little, a little bit of craziness brings an unbearable life some renewal, makes it bearable at least.

– Nahed, *A Certain Woman*

For the modern adulteress, the story is slightly different. The plight of the modern woman is articulated in detail. It is exemplary of a pressured container, overloaded, teeming with revolt, and about to spontaneously combust if an outlet is not found. While the medieval narratives give readers a final conclusion – the actual adultery – the modern narratives discuss the process that leads up to the act of adultery; the questions which have been avoided and deleted along the literary timeline by patriarchal control over religion and in the name of social decorum. Nahed and Connie here define a state of obliviousness, resulting from their lack of sexual fulfillment. Lawrence and El Badry both seem to suggest this notion through their narratives, portraying sex as poetic and hence very much detached from its mechanical and emotionless portrayals in the medieval narratives. In the modern world, female sexuality is reborn and even nurtured by its authors. In the medieval world, it is portrayed as bluntly as the women who engage in it – acceptable within the contract of marriage, condemned if it isn't within wedlock. The violent

reactions of conservative moralists and censors towards *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *A Certain Woman* confirm that, through humane portrayal of the adulterous wife and through raising the question of female sexual legitimacy, the authors of these texts have stepped across the fine line separating the acceptable from the taboo.

Perhaps the Wife of Bath was correct in her analysis of female psychology; and perhaps, human psychology in general, which also exemplifies Foucault's own theory: the forbidding of sex and sexuality in the realms of discourse made individuals crave it more; the pressure of censorship laws made individuals crave freedom more. For writers, their creativity attempted to burst free of such censorship; for women, whose sexuality and freedom had been controlled and suppressed for so long, it bursts forth also in the form of questions and quests for identities long confiscated by orders. The notion of sexuality that exploded carries within it issues of the psycho-sexual dimension of being. Sexuality is drilled into the foundations of human biological and psychological nature, and it is safe to say that perhaps it is also rooted in the foundations of human existence. In light of procreation, there *must* be the act of sex. With the act of sex, lust and pleasure are inevitable. Where there is lust and pleasure, there must exist hence the moral dilemmas of right and wrong, of will and lack thereof, of sin and punishment – and more importantly, of fidelity and betrayal. Into this moral dilemma, an inevitable cycle of repetition begins, where if the act of sex is the epitome of human existence, so are the moral issues that surround it.

ENDNOTES:

¹ *The Arabian Nights* is the popular title in English of the collection of stories known literally as *One Thousand and One Nights*. There is no fixed text of the work; for the edition based on the earliest extant manuscripts, see Muhsin Mahdi, ed., *Kitab Alf Layla wa-Layla* and particularly pp. 56-72 for the frame story and the adulteries.

² The English translation of the novel keeps the original title, *Imra'tun Ma*, but condenses subsections within the novel, from part 4 (pp. 198-203 in the Arabic original corresponding to pp. 142-144 in the English translation) and part 5 (pp. 281-288 in the Arabic original corresponding to pp. 198-204 in the English translation). However, these revisions do not modify my analysis, as they are condensation of media articles mentioned in the first subsection, and detailed statistics about land mines in Egypt in the second subsection.

³ In Sigmund Freud's renowned *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, the human mind is laid out in three essential parts – the *Id*, home to the repressed human desires and instincts, followed by the *ego*, which functions as the eye of perception and voice of reason, and finally, the *superego*, a voice of fear, guilt, censorship, and scolding. As a repressor, the superego suffocates the desires and instincts that arise from the *Id*. In his work, Freud constantly stressed on the repressed-repressor relationship between the human mind and the dilemma of performing what is 'socially' acceptable, as opposed to fulfilling unacceptable repressed desires (Freud 54-56).

⁴ This bloodlust borne of wounded male pride however, is not a new notion when it comes to literature about adulterous wives, where as a result of their infidelities, there seems to be a chain of murders. Literature of antiquity in particular exemplified the connection between adultery and death as early as Homer, in his depiction of the Trojan War and the abduction – or willing surrender – of Helen, wife of Menelaus, by the Trojan prince Paris. The epic story features the love-triangle of Helen, Menelaus and Paris, and exemplifies how a single adultery can lead to a massive political upheaval that brings about hundreds and thousands of deaths as if by chain-reaction, which is exactly the case in Shahrayar's blood-thirsty quest to cleanse his kingdom of women. With regard to Menelaus, his full-scale attack on Troy attempts to correct the wrong of having his wife accept Paris as her husband instead of him. It turns therefore into a relentless cycle that no longer becomes a personal catastrophe; it rather converts into a full-fledged bout of bloodshed that is both public and political, and hence a national issue

⁵ In Scheherazade's case, the narrations were not made with the intention of providing an educational manual on the ways of life, and yet the stories of *The Arabian Nights* "are among the most widely read and influential stories ever to be published in English" (Leeming 326) – read for entertainment purposes primarily, but also sensitively reflecting human, social, and psychological characteristics through stories "about human beings and their relationships, their capabilities, their desires, their true and false sense of values, their powers and their weaknesses" (Naithani 278)

⁶ In the classic Medieval sex-manual *The Perfumed Garden*, written some five centuries after *The Arabian Nights* and carrying much of its influence, this manuscript of illustrated erotica serves as a guide – on sexual health, techniques, male and female sex organs, overcoming sexual difficulties, and also offering stories of erotica to serve as examples for better love-making. *The Perfumed Garden* adopts and demonstrates much of the sensuality, erotica, and perverse subject matter from *The Arabian Nights*, where the same Islamic foundations are weaved into the narrative, as well as the same oriental ambience, and how stylistically there is the same terse, up-front manner in which the narratives are written. Amidst the manual's chapters however, there is one particular section entitled 'On the Deceits and Treacheries of Women' that offers a range of stories about how women have deceived and cuckolded their husbands. It feels somehow out of place amidst the general theme of 'guidance' offered by the manual, but at the same time, elaborates how ingeniously treacherous women can be, bluntly advocating that while women play an essential part in the joys of copulation, they are by nature sexually uncontrollable, will seize the first opportunity to deceive their husbands, and desperately need to be tamed – notions which underlie *The Arabian Nights*. Unlike *The Arabian Nights* however, *The Perfumed Garden* is not a collection of fiction for mere entertainment; it is meant to be a serious guide. The above-mentioned chapter however relies only on stories that carry much influence from the *The Arabian Nights* in terms of the adulteress

prototype, rendering the guide as literature strictly for male readers. It warns a man to be weary of a woman's ways and watch out for the first tell-tale signs of deceit, but more importantly, because there is no mention of male adultery, nor advice for women on how to avoid it, immediately marginalizing women as dwellers of the Harem only, and not active members in the sexual realm. For more on *The Perfumed Garden* by Sheikh Nafzawi, see translation of Richard Burton, known also for his translation of *The Arabian Nights* (with a new adaptation by Phillip Dunn).

⁷ My citations of middle English and their translations into modern English are from: Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Kent A. Hieatt and Constance Hieatt, eds. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.

⁸ The question remains as to *why* has this depiction of women remained throughout the middle ages and onwards? From the earliest times, the adulteress in particular has been a major concern. She became "a dominant feature in chivalric literature, and has become a major concern in Shakespeare's latest plays [and] adultery takes on a very special importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel" (Tanner 12). The adulterous wife has appeared and reappeared, as if by inheritance from one literary text to another. In many of the European medieval narratives, she has been a staple in fictional writing, where "so much material which is common to the [*Arabian*] *Nights* has been found in collections of stories put together in Europe" (Irwin 97). She is found in the *Decameron*, early fourteenth century; the *Canterbury Tales*, late fourteenth century; the *Heptameron*, fifteenth century; and the *Pentamerone*, seventeenth century. Each of these texts stylistically resembles one another in terms of structure, where there is a frame, a collection of stories, and almost identical female characters, as if a kind of cloning of the adulteress is taking place. Faithfully carried by her authors across hundreds of years of narratives, the adulteress was embodied in some of the most influential literary works ever written. Even though they were "stripped from their specifically Islamic and Oriental features," these European texts drew a great deal on the themes and characters, and even structural style that were first introduced through *The Arabian Nights* (Irwin 101).

⁹ The pear was amongst the substances traditionally used by doctors in the middle ages to prevent conception (Heffernan 31), and hence arises the question of whether or not Chaucer had deliberately used the pear tree to indicate that the adulterous couple were either trying to abort or needed a contraceptive.

¹⁰ The US publishers of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Grove Press, were taken to court in 1959 on the accounts of publishing the "obscene" text. While it was suppressed much earlier than the date of the trial, it was declared the book would remain suppressed because its obscenity "outweighed any literary merit" (Sova 103).

¹¹ Comparatively, in the historical epic love stories such as *Tristan and Iseult*, or *Guinevere and Lancelot*, it was easy to sympathize with the adulteries because they both ended in tragedy, where people died and hearts were broken. These romances also took place in the realms of the royal classes, and hence were detached somehow from the reality of the masses below.

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